AN ILLUSTRATED WESTERN MAGAZINE

Cowboy stories

MARCH
20c

A CLAYTON MAGAZINE

RIDIN' REVENGE

HOT LEAD SINGS A SIX-GUN SONG IN A BOOK-LENGTH COWBOY NOVEL BY

J. EDWARD LEITHEAD

IVORY, THE HORSE OF HORSES

A FAST-RIDING STORY OF A COW-PONY'S LOVE FOR A WADDIE BRANDED "HORSE-THIEF"

E. DOLD

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE BY

GLENN A. CONNOR

Ford

FORD—O. B. Zeigler reports 60 miles on a gallon—as he ran 15 miles on one quart. J. T. Jackson got 57 miles on a gallon out of a 1914 model Ford.

Studebaker

STUDEBAKER—F. A. Cole writes he put one on a Studebaker Special Six. Reports a saving of 50 per cent in gasoline.

Buick

BUICK—"I was getting 8 to 10 miles on a gallon. Yesterday I made a trip of 36 miles and used only 1¼ gallons."—L. L. Robinson.

Chevrolet

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Oldsmobile

OLDSMOBILE—J. R. Wood writes he increased mileage on his Oldsmobile from 17 miles a gallon to 30 miles a gallon by actual count on 3,000 miles."

Dodge Brothers Motor Vehicle

DODGE—"I made over 40 miles per gallon on my Dodge between Brownsville, Texas, and Tampico, Mexico."—T. L. Brown.

INTERNATIONAL TRUCKS

INTERNATIONAL TRUCK—"I find it better than you recommend it. On the International Truck we use, we are saving by positive test 41 per cent in gas and our engine uses less oil."—George Bell.

Sworn Affidavits

I, L. G. Stransky, Vice-President, J. A. Stransky Mfg. Company, being first duly sworn depose and say that the J. A. Stransky Mfg. Company have in their files thousands of unsolicited testimonials from satisfied users all over the world.

(Signed) L. G. Stransky,
Vice-President.

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 29th day of November, 1926. (Signed) Ernest Henegar,
Notary Public.

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I Drove 1300 Miles Without Buying Gasoline

No wonder over a million car owners have installed the Stransky Vaporizer! Here's a remarkable instance—one of many that shows how this amazing device has saved gasoline and increased power. J. R. Wood, of St. Louis, writes that he ran his car 3,000 miles on the same amount of gas that he formerly used on only 1,700 miles. Think of it! 1,300 miles without buying gasoline! Read the inventor's daring no-risk offer to you.

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Cowboy Stories

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Vol. V **MARCH NUMBER** **No. 2**

CONTENTS

COVER PAINTED IN OILS BY ELLIOTT DOLD

IN THE NEXT ISSUE—*An Announcement by* THE EDITOR..... 164

A PUNCHER'S PROTEST—*A Range Ballad by* S. OMAR BARKER..... 167

HELP YOUR FAVORITE AUTHORS WIN CASH PRIZES!..... 168

RIDIN' REVENGE—*A Book-Length Cowboy Novel by* J. EDWARD LEITHEAD..... 169

LOADED AND PRIMED—*A Short Story by* RICHARD HILL WILKINSON..... 204

THE FENCIN' OF THE WINDOW-SASH—*A Boothill Boggs Yarn by* SCOTT HAUTER 213

CONCERNING CHAPS 221

HINDOO HOMBRES—*A Short Story by* PAUL EVERMAN..... 222

THE COLOR OF HORSES 232

IVORY, THE HORSE OF HORSES—*A Complete Cowboy Novelette by* GLENN A. CONNOR 233

THE WHISTLING COWPUNCHER—*A Short Story by* FRED B. MICHELSON..... 255

LEFT-HANDED RELATIONS—*A Short Story by* PETER A. LEA..... 265

SNAKES 270

THE SADDLE WOLF—*A Six-Part Cowboy Serial by* W. D. HOFFMAN—*Part Four*..... 271

THE HITCHIN'-RACK—*A Get-Together Department for Our Readers*..... 289

PAWNEE BILL'S QUESTION AND ANSWER BOX—*An Information Department*... 295

THE SWAPPERS' EXCHANGE—*A Department Where You Can Exchange Something You Don't Want for Something You Would Like to Have*..... 296

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ONE YEAR AFTER

COWBOY NERVE MAKES WAR ON RANGELAND TREACHERY

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By J. R. JOHNSTON

THE BATTLE ROYAL

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There were few to witness the blackleg's arrival.

RIDIN' REVENGE

A BOOK-LENGTH COWBOY NOVEL

By J. Edward Leithead

Illustrated by Jerry Delano

Gratton Stockett shows that the code of the cow camps is the code of honor of real men.

CHAPTER I

"The Full Blast" Changes Hands

THE business of the big hombre who got off the paint-shy old Concord at Gila Crossing camp was advertised by his dress as plain as if he had worn a placard on his back; black frock coat and somber-hued trousers tucked into cowboy boots sans the usual spurs, narrow collar with string tie, low-cut vest and white cuffs, the latter shot far out of his coat sleeves. Those protruding cuffs were as much the hallmark of the gambler as the rest of his attire put together.

There were but few beings out in the sun to witness the blackleg's arrival. One of them, a Mr. Bob Red Dog, old-timer of old-timers in that part of Arizona, was sucking his pipe and simultaneously covering a hole in the rotting sidewalk boards with his patched-seat corduroy pants, said hole having been driven by the vicious hoofs of a "salty" horse the night of ranch payday last month.

"Four cracks at a catamount!" muttered Bob Red Dog, who had discarded his real surname and attached in its place the handle of the town in Texas from which he hailed. "With the camp shore totterin' on its last legs, less'n some trouble fixin' fool can locate who's doin' the rustlin' on this range, here comes another cold-deck gent to help it fall. Only folks that'll have any dinero when the bust comes will be the cow-lifters an' the gamblers."

Red Dog was more observant than the men of some other frontier callings, a habit acquired from reading brands accurately at a distance most people would need a field-glass to see them. The cut of this gambler's features, the fire-and-ice light of his eyes, intrigued the old cowdog as had few faces in his burning of vast mileage, a-fork the pick of the Southwest's ranch strings. He toted "open-see" iron, too, this blackleg, for a cartridge-belt slanted in view where the frock coat parted, and there was a satisfactory bulge below his right hip. Perhaps he packed a vest-pocket derringer, also, as did most of his breed, but at least he didn't depend entirely on it, and for this Mr. Bob Red Dog rather respected him, having a dislike for men who used weapons that could be concealed in a closed fist and bark death unexpectedly.

Red Dog uncovered the hole in the boardwalk for the unwary to step into, and

propelled his old bones in the wake of the new arrival as the latter passed through the swinging doors of The Full Blast honkatonk.

This time of day trade was dull in all departments and but little interest was aroused by the entrance of the stranger gambler among the inmates of the place. It was really too hot to get excited about *anything*. Old Bob borrowed a match from a sullen bartender and directed an eye after the figure he had followed as the newcomer sought out the proprietor of the joint, "Bull" Upright. "Squattin' Bull had oughta been his name," Red Dog often said, "because settin' is the best thing Bull does, even when he's thirsty. An' any hombre too lazy to stand up to his redeye is the ace o' squatters."

Bull and the latest comer to the Crossing were apparently swapping amiable business talk when Red Dog's attention was distracted from them by a little episode in the more immediate foreground. Perfunctorily, as he came in, Bob had observed the favorite of the hall, called "The Angel," sitting alone with head in hands at one of the tables men fought for at night. Now she had company and was resenting it. The "company" was a certain range rider known to Red Dog with not particular favor, who had drifted in a few minutes after the older cowdog.

"I got my time to-day, which means they's enough in my chaps for a two-handed party from now till to-morrow mornin'; then I'll be flat an' hittin' the trail away from this blindstaggerin' range!" Joker Jennings, the younger cowdog—his sobriquet the result of a nearly fatal mistake in a poker game—blatted at the Angel in a tone indicating he would not be denied. "I'd ruther take a whack at desert herdin' than fool around waitin' for the waddies to rustle every last head hereabout. How's that!" He smacked a wad of long green on the table, turned his head and nodded to a bartender, who bustled up immediately.

"You and your dirty money can take a quick hop to hell for all I care, Joker!" declared the Angel, her dark eyes roving in some disgust over the unshaven face of the cowpuncher. She had never liked him, and, in her present downcast mood, he seemed as repulsive as a Gila monster. The girl arose, meaning to leave the table.

This being contrary to the wishes of Joker, he said so in a menacing manner, gripping her arm. "Don't cha get flouncy with me. Sit down, damn you . . ."

The Angel's back was toward the proprietor and the stranger blackleg. When she heard swift footsteps from their direction, she supposed, of course, that it was Upright hastening to bully her into submission. But it was not a shirt-sleeved arm which reached forth to tear loose the grip of Joker's cruelly sunk fingers, nor the bellowing bass of Bully that gave voice.

"Forcin' jack or affections on a lady ain't a white man's play, get me, polepuss?"

Joker Jennings cursed reply; such a curse, in fact, that the big gambler let go his wrist and placed the same fingers, bunched hard, against the dirty mouth with a vigor which lost Joker a few front teeth and sat him on the floor.

"Just amble wherever you've a mind to, lady; he's figgerin' to see a dentist, an' got time for nothin' else," said the blackleg to the wide-eyed Angel. Turning his broad back in what seemed a foolhardy invitation to beef him—if Mr. Jennings' nerve was working—he touched fingers to wheel-brimmed Stetson.

The man on the floor half drew his gun and Bob Red Dog tensed for a spring in his direction. But the Colt slid back, unfired, in the holster. Red Dog relaxed against the bar as if he had never intended quitting it. Shortly he was jerked out of that indolent pose by further developments from the Angel's refusal of Joker's demands.

Joker Jennings had holstered his six-shooter for the reason that he saw Bull Upright, scowling like a fiend, actually on his feet and heading for the horner-in. When Upright personally took a hand in any job of trouble, it usually climaxed in the smoke, and it wasn't The Full Blast proprietor who, in the end, reclined beneath the writhing vapor, either. Bull

would attend to the executing of Joker's revenge.

The Angel was able to say merely "thank you" to her champion. He had called her "lady" and it left her tongue-tied. He had moved from her side when he perceived the advancing Upright, and he continued to move, laying his course so that the girl would be out of the line of fire.

"You look mad," quoth the big gambler as Bull appreciably slowed his pace. Somehow the look of the stranger warned Bull that he was *hastening* to his come-uppance.

Bob Red Dog held his breath. In this, Red Dog was one with every person in the room except the sudden enemies.

"My looks is red signallin' you, then, butt-in!" harshly spoke The Full Blast's big boss. "What the hell right you got to spoil trade, huh? You don't get no job here dealin' faro or nothin' else; fact is, the camp's shut to you. But I'll give you a scar to remember me by before you vamos!"

"Vamos? That sounds like an invite to change my base, an' I've only just got here," said the gambler in a voice that matched the look Red Dog had seen in his eyes, and had admired. "Sorry to disappoint you, amigo, *but I stay!* An' when a lady is bein' put on——"

"*Lady*—the Angel!" roared Upright. A deadly pause, with the two big men stepping like wary cats. "We'll put on your tombstone: 'polite, but stubborn'."

"Better write it: 'his gun stuck'," suggested the gambler smoothly, "'cause that'll be the only reason I don't get you, mister!"

He knew that the other was about to act and preceded him by a split-hair second, sweeping back his coat with his right hand and uncovering the gun-scabbard on his thigh, which he emptied quick as a rattler can protrude its forked tongue. Bull's gun-spew scorched the floor paint; he leaned forward, more, more; broke his nose, so solidly did his face come in contact with the planks which shivered nightly beneath heavyfooted dancers; but his nose did not pain him. He was "west."

Deliberately sheathing his Colt as he lounged over the dead

The big gambler placed the same fingers, bunched hard, against the dirty mouth.

man in careless attitude, the gambler flung an icy stare into every corner and remarked:

"Wonder to me is that hombre didn't cross up with heart failure before, folks; reckon, from my short go with him, that he was quite some helluva nuisance. Now, I was lookin' for a place to turn my game, but I didn't expect to have one shoved on me, free gratis, or I should say, for tradin' bullets successful with a bully before I'd even got rid o' my stage-cramp. I like this joint, ladies an' gents, an' aim to pull on *Mister* Upright's boots an' stand up in 'em. Is there any heirs or pa'tic'lar amigos o' his who'd like to argue ownership with me?"

The question went unanswered. None had ever thought of seeing Bull Upright lying at the feet of a conqueror. And the worst—or the best—of it was that he would never get up again of his own volition. The gunwork and audacity of this unnamed newcomer spellbound all present, except Bob Red Dog. That ancient cowman had never known his judgment of men to assay more grit than gold. He saw Joker Jennings slide through the front door with his unspent wad, when the new "proprietor" suggested that six feet of earth, not the floor of the honkatonk, was the proper resting place for the late Mr. Upright.

Red Dog did not answer the "call for shovels," but hung on the heels of the gambler as the latter slowly circuited the hall, shaking hands with card men and girls, and assuring one and all they would find him square-dealing so long as they themselves dealt square. The card men especially took this to heart; under Upright's rule, nothing had been too "hot" to try in The Full Blast.

Limp handshakes, muttered words, were all that the new "boss" got from his "employees," still dumbfounded by his high-handed procedure, until he approached the cause of it all: the Angel, otherwise Dolly Erath. The gambler's shadow, Mr. Red Dog, could not get near in time to hear the first part of their conversation, but the Angel was saying as he achieved earshot:

". . . I wanted to quit long ago, but Upright held out my money on me. It's a rotten life! And if you'll give me my dough, it's over two thousand bucks and it's in the safe, I won't lose any time clearing out."

"I'll get it for you pronto," nodded the audacious stranger. "It's my notion everyone should have a chance to go straight if they want to. Who knows the safe combination?"

"Tom, the barkeep, for one. You're sure an ace, Mister—what?"

"Call me Grat."

"Grat! Anything else? Mind, I'm not being curious."

"Why," said the gambler with an illuminating smile, "you might call me, full length, Gratton Stockett. It's no shameful secret."

And as the gambler and the Angel walked to the bar to interview Tom, the barkeep, Bob Red Dog sucked at his dead pipe with gusto.

"I've got grass-staggers!" he exclaimed untruthfully. "The death pip shore oughta be on that hombre's visitin' card, an' his nerve is a monument to caution catamounts. I wish, doggone, that he'd tackle the rustlers in this distric' an' take 'em into camp like he done Bull—layin' down!"

CHAPTER II

The Woman With a Hemp Necktie

SO Gratton Stockett assumed proprietorship of The Full Blast because he had everybody connected with it buffaloed. It was the most extraordinary episode in the history of Gila Crossing, and the Crossing was used to the unusual. The gamblers, the girls and the bartenders stayed on under the new management; after a week's trial they conceded it was far, far better than the old.

Bob Red Dog had become a hanger-on at the gambling-hall saloon. It was difficult for him to get work these days. More and more often he found himself bucking the grub line, for his years weighed heavily upon him at times and steady saddle-work, such as he had done when younger, was now out of the question. He dis-

covered a real friend in Grat Stockett, the reason for his admiration of the big gambler increasing. Grat, he learned, was an ex-cowboy, turned faro banker because he had natural skill in that line and it promised greater remuneration than range-riding, while entailing less hard work.

"What! Shyin' away from hard work at *your* age, boy?" the old puncher had exclaimed when Grat explained his reason for change of calling. "I never think much o' gamblers as a breed, but you ain't the tinhorn sort, not any. Still an' all, hard work wouldn't hurt none a husky beef critter like you, an' that's a plumb compliment. You got any hankerin' for thrills outside o' them you rope up from settin' against a faro layout?"

Grat admitted that anything red-blooded was in his line, and the rustler-hating old man told of the plight of the Grass Basin ranchers, of which Gila Crossing was the central settlement, though it was decidedly on the wane.

"There won't be business enough to keep The Full Blast blastin', Grat, I'd even say there won't be no Crossin', only a ghost town left, if them waddies ain't caught soon an' hung high as a rope can jerk 'em," warned Red Dog. "That ain't just granny talk on my part; it's *so!* Slow but shore, cattle in big bunches an' little is bein' rustled an' drove over into old Mex, an' nobody knows who's doin' it, though it's suspicioned some local boys are the skunks in the alfalfa. I can't give you no details when I dunno any to tell, but I'm here to lift a helpin' paw if you decide to play cattle dick an' get atter them beef runners."

Grat Stockett had stared straight before him a moment, then laughed and surveyed his surroundings. "So there's danger o' me losin' this joint after all; not in the way I got it, but. . . . Well, they say, 'come easy, go easy,' Red Dog, an' pretty gen'rally that rule works out. I'll roll that proposition to hunt rustlers over in my mind an' let you know. Meantime, mum, old rannyhan."

One night, when Stockett had been in possession of The Full Blast about ten days, the riders from the various Grass Basin outfits invaded town to blow their month's wages. The Full Blast, in the past, had always taken in most of these pay checks across its bar and gaming tables, and the fact that a new man was running the place caused no noticeable falling off in attendance. Indeed, there was a prevailing curiosity to see the gun-slick hombre who had traded a bullet for a business.

Conspicuous in that crowd was "Colonel" Clint Lightner, of the Double L. The military title was purely honorary, for Lightner had never been in the army, but he looked the part. He was considered the Basin's baron of cattle, his herds being said to number between fifteen and twenty thousand head, at least, before the rustlers waxed so energetic in those parts. Clint talked continually about his losses and was forever railing at the sheriff of the county for his "hands in the air" attitude. The peace officer in question never had said so, but it is not unlikely, considering the manner in which Lightner rode him publicly, that he would have enjoyed shotgunning the baron's belly out through his backbone.

The first thing the colonel did on entering The Full Blast, even before he downed a drink (and neglect in this regard showed how important he deemed the act given preference) was to seek out Grat Stockett, introduce himself and compliment Grat on ridding Gila Crossing of a bully.

"Wasn't specially hard to beat him on the draw. I've outgunned faster gents, Colonel Lightning," said Grat, leaning back against the bar and surveying the florid cattleman, gaudy in attire, half Mexican, half cowboy.

"Lightner," corrected the colonel sharply.

"Excuse, amigo, I didn't catch it right. Nominate your dust-settler an' say you forgive me."

"Sure it's forgotten." The ranchman moved in against the long bar and shortly the elbows of the pair crooked.

Old Red Dog was stationed farther along the bar, his ears wide open and a little frown of puzzlement on his leathery face, occasioned by Stockett's mistake in

repeating the colonel's name, for the latter had said "Lightner" plainly enough in his self-introduction.

Soon, of course, the Double L owner launched into his favorite topic—rustlers. And Grat kept nodding his head, listening as attentively as if Red Dog had not previously gone over practically the same ground.

"I've been a cowboy, Colonel, an' I'm free to say I hate a cow thief," Stockett said when Lightner paused for want of breath; latterly he had been vigorously denouncing the absent sheriff, who was generally supposed to be in the hills southward, hunting for the waddies with a picked posse. "I know what this Basin range is like, havin' come across a good piece of it in the stage, an' I don't admire to see good cattle country go to ruin because of rustlers or sheep, though the sheep are the worst!"

"The cowpunch speaks there!" said Lightner, smiling.

"You bet he does! But rustlers come next by a split hair."

"By the way," the cowman degressed, "a—ahem—lady who used to work in this place has just bought out a small owner whose range adjoins one side of mine; Miss Erath, I mean. Rattler Jones sold her his outfit, or what's left of it, mighty cheap before the rustlers cleaned him out entirely. Good grass and a water-hole on his land, but only a few hundred head of dogies, and the young lady has a great deal of courage to take such a chance with her money. Don't know what she paid exactly for the brand, but Rattler was ready to let it go for a song."

Stockett was rubbing his chin and gazing straight at the back-bar. "Glad to hear the girl is gettin' the right kind of a start. Mebbe the rustlers will let her alone, she bein' a woman. When she left here on the stage, she didn't say where she was goin', nor what she intended doin'. She had a li'l nest-egg."

"She speaks very well of you," Lightner graciously informed him. "I've been to see her once and we had a good chat. You ought to take time off for a visit, Stockett. I think she'd like to have you." The colonel was wearing an extremely broad smile when he said this; but there was a light deep in his eyes which somehow gave the lie to that smile.

Many thoughts were coursing through the mind of Grat Stockett as he watched the colonel covertly in the back-bar mirror. "Gracias for tellin' me; mebbe I will fork a hoss out that-a-way some day soon. I reckon you'll give the lady your support, Colonel, if she should need it? The code o' the cow camps, as I was taught it, is trigger quick an' first, an' stand up for the women."

"So it is, so it is. And you may be sure I'll keep an eye on the young lady. The cattle game is so different from the one she had been in, I asked her how come she had thought of investing in Rattler's place. And she told me she was raised on a ranch, lived there until she was eighteen, when she got on the wrong trail."

There was some further conversation of no consequence, and Colonel Lightner sauntered off to "have a look" at the games of chance now running high and wide. Grat concealed a crooked smile by putting a hand up to his face; sharp old Red Dog saw the motion and suspected the reason for it. He asked Grat later, when they were in a corner by themselves:

"Your hearin' ain't poor, boy. What made you yap that 'Colonel Lightnin'?' Clint don't like to be miscalled."

"Mebbe I don't cotton to him an' was tryin' to get a rise, Bob. Quien sabe?" was all the reply Grat would make, and his expression was inscrutable.

Possibly an hour had gone by in comparative peace when Colonel Lightner, who apparently was content this night to watch the play of others at the tables and wheel, declared in a far-reaching tone:

"I'd like to have everybody's attention for a minute!"

Play was suspended almost immediately, for the colonel was highly esteemed by the Grass Basin natives, who thought they couldn't get along without him as a citizen. Speaking financially, neither could they. Grat Stockett, who was faro banking, with old Red Dog perched above him as case-keeper, paused in the act of sliding

a card from the deal box and listened with the rest.

"The rustling in the Basin has gotten so bad," said the colonel, tilting back his Mexican hat with a graceful gesture when he perceived the proper attention was being accorded him, "that I've just made up my mind to offer a reward of five thousand dollars for the capture of the thieves, or information leading to their capture. That amount I'll pay personally and the county offers a couple thousand more, so, cowboys, here's a chance to grab a pile for a rainy day."

He paused, and smiled while the listening men, and women, too, applauded his announcement. Bob Red Dog and Grat Stockett did not join in the demonstration; a slow smile spread itself across the lean visage of big Grat; Red Dog stole a glance at him from his lookout seat and scratched a hairy ear with his pipe. Clint Lightner was gazing straight at Stockett when he lifted a hand again, for silence. And got it.

"Something else, boys. I'm willing to bet another five thousand that nobody collects the first five—ten thousand in all, which I'd rather gamble this way than on cards and the black and red. I don't reckon I stand much chance of losing, though." Steadily did his glance bear upon The Full Blast's proprietor, as if in challenge.

"That's a pretty good offer an' worth tryin' for, Colonel Lightnin' — I mean Lightner," spoke up Grat, for it seemed as though the cattle baron would address him directly if he didn't say something. "The hombre who corrals the rustlers also takes the five thousand you're bettin' that they can't be corralled; I'll cover that bet—five thousand o' The Blast's money says *somebody* collects your ten!"

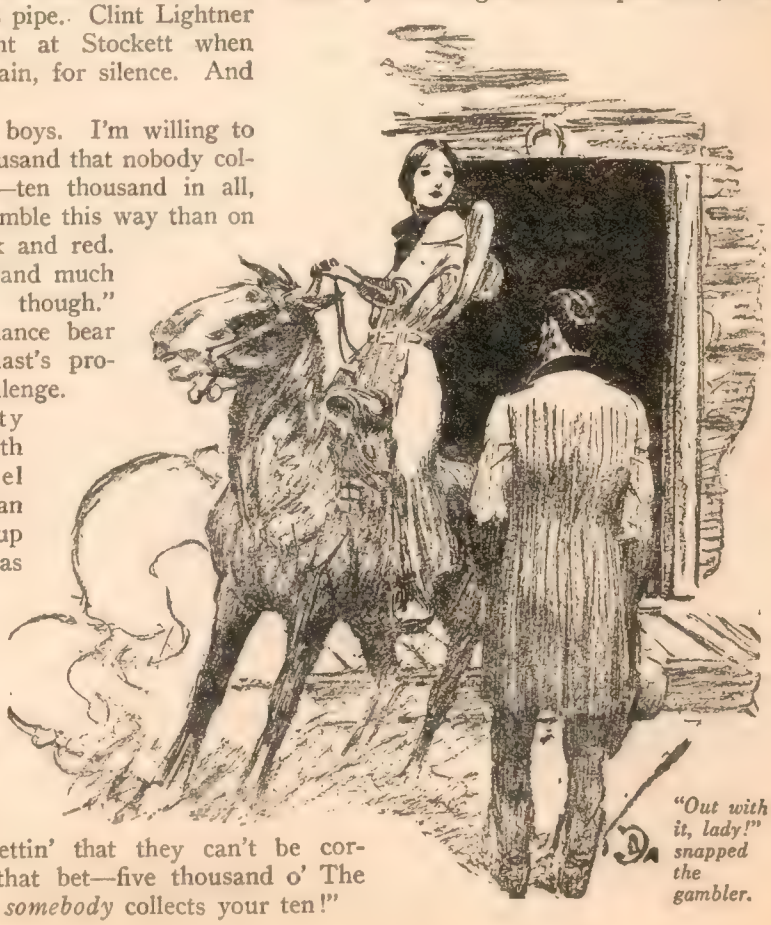
"That's the stuff!" exulted the colonel. "I was hoping your blood wasn't water. I'll be around camp until morning, and when the bank opens, I'll get the amount of the bet pronto. What say we let the bank hold the stakes?"

"You connected with the bank, colonel?" Grat asked. He stretched his long legs beneath the faro layout; this made it more convenient for him to get at his gun, as he slid down in the chair.

"I'm a director." The colonel's face had flamed for an instant as Grat committed error a second time in calling him "Lightning;" and once more the flush surged fiercely as Stockett said:

"Uh-huh. Well, suppose we stow them stakes in my safe. They'll be safer."

Everyone expected disastrous results; there sounded an undercurrent of oaths, not only from Lightner's cowpunchers, but



"Out with it, lady!" snapped the gambler.

those of other outfits as well, against this outspoken stranger gambler. But the colonel himself did not allow his wrath to burst all bounds; and to the others he said quickly:

"No trouble, now, boys. Mr. Stockett doesn't know me like the rest of you do; he's been here such a short while." Then he spoke to Grat: "Your safe will suit me as well as the bank vault. I'll see you in the morning. Have your money ready."

And as the jingling baron strode from the honkatonk, followed by certain of his admiring cowboys, who thought that a deadly insult had been hurled in the boss's teeth and would have resented it in the smoke had he but permitted action, Grat Stockett coolly resumed his dealing. Had he spoken his thoughts aloud when Clint finished addressing the crowd, he would have said:

"Nope, Lightnin', I don't know you like the rest o' these homos do. I reckon I know you in a damsight different way an' you're wise to it!"

Mid-morning, two days later, Grat Stockett was smoking a black cigar reflectively on the stoop of his honkatonk, his booted feet twisted around the front legs of his chair, which was tilted against the wall. The sun was bright and warm; but his thoughts were scarcely in agreement with Old Sol's mood, being dark and exceedingly cold. He was planning destruction, how best to go about it, and rather more from a sense of duty to cow country society than a craving for personal gain. He was about to exchange his broadcloth attire for the outfit of the open; flannel shirt, chaps and spurs; and his chair at the faro layout for a reliable Cheyenne saddle.

He hadn't quite made up his mind whom to put in charge of The Full Blast during his campaign against the unknown rustlers of the Basin, but was considering old Red Dog, reliable Red Dog, who had become as faithful to him as a man Friday. In the honkatonk safe reposed Grat's stake money and Colonel Lightner's, placed there the morning previous.

Clint had departed from his second meeting with the audacious Stockett with lips mute but eyes deadly and half-mocking. Grat knew that the gauntlet had been thrown down to him and Red Dog was amazed to hear what the honkatonk boss privately thought of the "big citizen" of the Basin. But he promised to keep his mouth tight shut.

Grat's mind wandered from the main issue temporarily, dwelling a while on Dolly Erath. He did not love the girl at all; indeed, he had seen but very little of her, and would have interfered on the behalf of any other woman just as quickly as he had in her case. But she interested him, he couldn't deny that; and he hoped sincerely that she would make the grade in the cattle business. If he could help her, he would. That was in his code, as it was the code of all real men of the cow camps.

Strange coincidence that he should be thinking of her, when she appeared; and in a startling manner.

A clatter of hoofs, betokening the coming of a hard-running bronc. He shifted his gaze in the direction of the sound and was just in time to see Dolly, the erstwhile "Angel," turning into the main street from a lane which ran between two false-fronted buildings a hundred yards upstreet.

She was attired quite differently from when he last saw her; and more becomingly, it struck him at once. But for not more than a flashing instant did he dwell upon her clothes—woolen blouse with brilliant neck scarf, corduroy divided skirts—for the girl's streaming hair, her hat hanging by its chin-strap down her back, and the hasty gait of her mount suggested that trouble was on her trail. This hint was strengthened as soon as he had a closeup of her expression, which was one removed from registering absolute terror.

"Out with it, lady!" snapped the gambler, deserting his chair in a hurry as she swept up to the stoop.

"They're going to hang me!" she gasped, her dismount so precipitate that she all but fell; weak-kneed, too. The arms of Grat went round her supportingly.

For a moment he couldn't speak. *"Hang*

you—a woman? An' who's aimin' to do this an' what for, Miss Dolly?"

"Some of the Double L men, and others. I don't know them all. A few are the *very* boys who used to dance with me and treat every payday. Mr. Stockett, I'm scared simple! I just managed to get here ahead of them. I haven't a friend in the world, except you. You helped me once, but you mayn't want to do it again, and this is a hundred times worse," The girl was on the verge of collapse.

Grat snagged a tight rope on his senses which threatened to mill a bit, her announcement was so astonishing. He led her to the chair he had recently occupied, discerning that she might faint any moment. "Sit down here a minute, sister," said he kindly. "I'll fetch you somethin' from inside."

He judged she would rather not face the hangers-on in the big hall just then. But it was impossible to prevent them from hearing, and already a few had sauntered to the front door and looked out curiously, noting, besides the trembling, white-faced girl and the solicitous gambler, the foam-spotted pony by the stoop, which hung its head and spread its legs the instant the ex-dancehall girl quit the leather.

"Don't bother her, boys. Somethin's dead wrong, but I ain't found out exactly what yet," admonished Grat, striding through the open door as the men made room for him to pass.

He had barely set foot in the hall, making for the bar with a call to the only barkeep then on duty for a whisky straight, when a scream from Dolly Erath brought him leaping outside again, hand on Colt.

"Here they come!" The girl was pointing hysterically upstreet, where a dust cloud was rolling, pushed by ten or a dozen quirt-jerking, spur-sinking horsemen.

Grat caught hold of the girl's arm, half-lifting her out of the chair. "Get inside!" he said tersely. "I'll knock the horns off this gang, though I don't sabe what it's all about . . . except you said hangin'——"

"I'm not going to run, and let you stay and get shot for me!" she panted reply, and shook off his grip, pale as death, but fighting her fear in an exhibition of true gameness. "Haven't time to explain, but I've done nothing. Lend me a gun!"

"Wait!" commanded the one-time cowboy. "If you had a shooter in your fist, they wouldn't hesitate to drill away at you, likely. Lemme see what I can do." Perhaps he doubted her ability to stand to her hardware in a gun-scrap; perhaps he demurred lest she draw fire and succumb to a lethal wound. She had run for protection to the right man!

He did not ask the men who had crowded doorward at Dolly's coming to "sit in;" one reason, because they were no longer there, foreseeing a duel, while not understanding the occasion for it; and for another reason, they were too new acquaintances of Stockett for him to place any dependence on them in support of an effort directed against their saddle brothers of the Grass Basin range. He was much in doubt of what they might do behind his back, but there was no way of facing up with them and the coming riders at the same time.

He disdained to lift a yell for old Red Dog, yet vaguely wondered where the ancient cowboy could be that he hadn't sallied forth to ascertain the cause of all the commotion streetward. Usually Bob had his long nose in everything, sniffing away like a bloodhound.

The Double L boys and "others" rode up to face an iron-chinned man on the stoop, with the girl half concealed by his big body. Grat held his Colt with the business end poking toward the warped and broken boards, his muscular hand tensed to "pitch up and line 'em!"

"We want that gal, blackleg!" blared one cowboy, pushing his horse through the swirling dust until its forehoofs were planted, thumpingly, on the edge of the stoop and the whole rickety affair creaked and quaked. "Put up your gun peaceable an' stand away from her! Got your rope, Pete?"

This question was answered by another of the saddle party, who showed his rope-coil, howling:

"Betcha, Dave! Right here an' spread

to snug her neck. An' there's that big tree over in front o' Harker's store. She led us a helluva fast ramble, Angel did, but fetched us bee-line to the best li'l gallows in fifty square mile o' the Basin country, I reckon!"

There were bull-throated voicings rearward, agreeing with this. A wind-rent haze of dust floated over all, including the gambler and the girl on the stoop.

"You hombres don't know what the hell you're at!" declared Grat. "To hang a woman would be a plumb black disgrace to the whole Southwest cattle land an' damn well you hombres sabe it! What the blazin' hell's she done, anyways, that makes you take atter her so onnery?"

"I dunno as we've got to tell nothin' to you, tinhorn," responded the cowboy who had first opened his mouth in demanding the ex-Angel. "But I will say, since you ask so damn pretty, that the gal was seen night-ridin' with rustlers. The colonel lost more beef last night. An' there's four of us can swear it was her with them thieves. The moonlight was strong on her!"

"I don't have to ask the lady herself if that's a lie or not, 'cause I know 'tis," said Grat Stockett, with deadly undertone. "But *had* it been she was guilty o' such, what right you locoed jakes got to be ridin' hell-for-leather with a lass-loop fixed her neck-size, huh? It's a dead open-an'-shut she's a case for the sheriff!"

"Sheriff ain't here an' we got no time to wait for *him*. This gal's been hand-in-glovin' with the rustlers on this range right along, I betcha, givin' 'em tips which fellers what got drunk with her let loose." Thus spoke "Dave," who was a Lightner top-hand and a sinful-looking somebody, whom nobody but a blind man would have trusted.

"Well, I'll deal for the sheriff while he's off snoopin' or snoozin', whichever," quoth Mr. Stockett boldly. "You just imagine it's the sheriff's eye sightin' over the whole o' this business!"

The Colt which had crumpled and conquered Bull Upright flipped to a not uncertain level; Dave made no move to reach up, or down. He didn't appear to be greatly disturbed by the "bead" the gambler had drawn on the spot where the heart is usually located.

The reason that Dave Gant wasn't agitated by Stockett's drop was good and sufficient. A figure in chaps had crept to the edge of the honkatonk roof and was making ready a forty-foot lariat for a downward cast. The target was a double one, none other than Grat and Dolly; and suddenly the rope writhed out above their heads. The thrower was a lasso artist, and hatred to settle a score with the ropes made it a "labor of love" in a manner of speaking.

The loop was wide enough to clear the tip of the barrel of the gun in Grat's extended hand; a quick but careful haul upward on the lariatist's part and the hemp snugged in under the gambler's right arm, pinned his left and flattened Dolly Erath against his broad back. A neat bit of ropework.

The man on the roof followed up his initial success by jerking powerfully sidewise, coming to his knees with the effort, and upsetting the lassoed pair. Grat's free and gun arm was flung upward and the care he exercised in keeping his weight from injuring Dolly worked to his disadvantage.

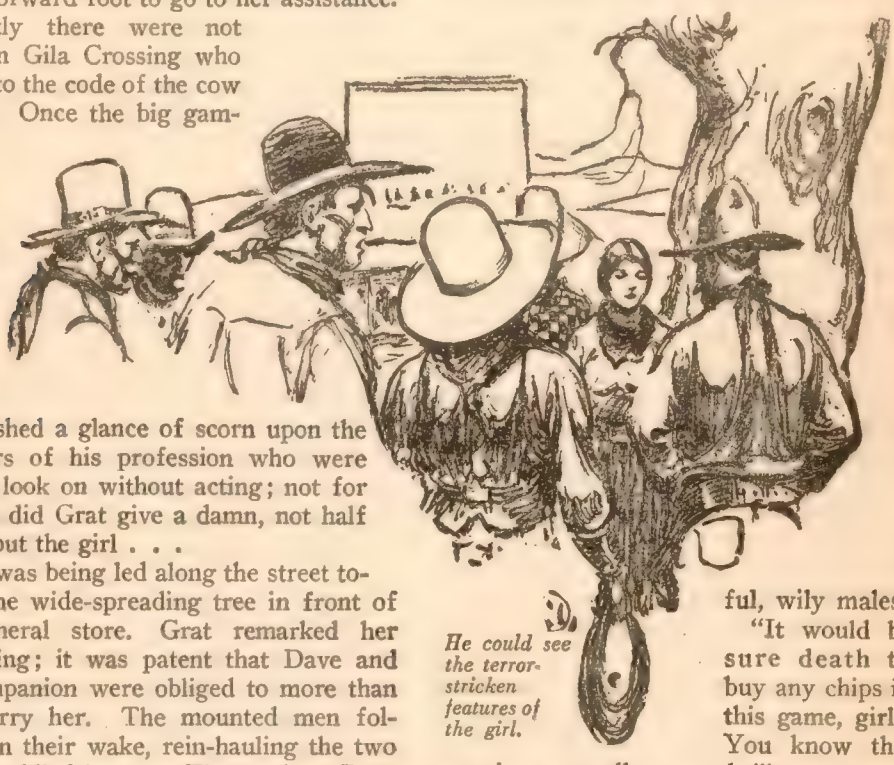
The downfall of the girl and the gambler was what Dave Gant and his friends had been awaiting.

"Great work, Joker!" yelled Dave, and he drove his horse forward with a touch of the spur, clip-clopping across the stoop. It looked to the bystanders as if he meant to ride down the hemp-dragged man and girl; but he proved such conclusion erroneous when, in passing them, he loosed a foot from the stirrup and kicked the waving arm of Stockett, causing Grat to drop that menacing pistol. A cheer came from Dave's backers, for Dave and for Joker Jennings, the man on the roof, who had postponed "taking a whack at desert herdin'" until he could "fix" Grat Stockett and the ex-Angel.

The Double L top-hand was out of the saddle in a jiffy as the gambler's six-gun clattered on the stoop boards, and there was a forward movement by several other members of the lynch-bent posse. Several of The Blast's cardmen poked their heads

through the honkatonk doorway, but did not offer to interfere, as the cowboys pounced on their new boss and held him while Dave Gant removed the rope from Dolly's person, leaving Stockett still inside the loop, which was hastily drawn tight and over his right arm. Joker tossed his end down to the platform and disappeared from the roof, saying he would join them presently, to "hold that blackleg hawg-tight!"

Grat struggled stalwartly, but it was all bootless. He saw the terrified girl dragged into the street between Dave and another cowpuncher; and not a man within eye-range of the proceeding so much as shuffled a forward foot to go to her assistance. Evidently there were not many in Gila Crossing who owned to the code of the cow camps! Once the big gambler flashed a glance of scorn upon the members of his profession who were able to look on without acting; not for himself did Grat give a damn, not half a one, but the girl . . .



He could see the terror-stricken features of the girl.

She was being led along the street toward the wide-spreading tree in front of the general store. Grat remarked her staggering; it was patent that Dave and his companion were obliged to more than half carry her. The mounted men followed in their wake, rein-hauling the two empty-saddled horses. The cowboy, Pete, was in the van of the mounted with his rope which was to do the villainous work. The fellows holding Grat were eager to join their mates and be in at the death!

"This is the yellowest damn camp in the cow country!" shouted the enraged Stockett. "Red Dog, come a-runnin'! Where you been till now!" Just as if old Bob was standing where he could be seen!

The girls who had been Dolly Erath's professional associates when she was the Angel, and who rather envied her escape from the sordid life, cried aloud in nervous reaction to the imminent hanging of their one-time "sister;" it was as if their own necks were destined to feel the horrible, strangulating clutch of the hemp. They no longer regarded her with jealous dislike. Grat heard several of them imploring The Full Blast's broadcloth sharpers to "Do something, for Gawd's sake, boys!"

And a croupier off duty from the roulette wheel replied, voicing the sentiment of all that group of cautious, self-thoughtful, wily males:

"It would be sure death to buy any chips in this game, girls. You know this gang just as well as we do!"

Grat was giving three sturdy punchers a devil of a tussel to hold him, roped though his arms were, when a bow-legged cow hombre pushed out through The Blast's front door and up to the wrestling group. It was Joker Jennings. And he knew just what he wanted to do.

"Haul him over to that telegraft pole, fellers, will you?" He pointed. "Good

thing Dave figgered where the floozie was headin' when she dodged off the track an' sent me around to the back door, wasn't it? I didn't have no trouble gettin' in; but when I started to go up the ladder to the trap-door, that old sonnovagun Red Dog tried to stop me. I didn't want to pull Stockett's 'tention with a shot, so just fetched Bob a belt——"

"That's why he hasn't mixed in this, eh, pole-puss?" snarled Grat and once again nearly broke from the grip of his captors in a mad effort to charge, head lowered, into Jennings.

Joker struck the gambler a vicious blow on the head with his fist, which knocked off Grat's hat and all but grounded him.

"Don't you have so damned much mouth, tinhorn!" rapped Jennings. "The other boys are 'tending to the Angel what was, but I'll personal even up for those teeth I ain't got," and he opened his cavernous pie-chute to show how many snags were missing. "C'mon, boys! Drag 'im! Gimme a-holt that rope an' you can scatter pronto to see the lady kick!"

They yanked the big gambler off the stoop, and when he stumbled, going to his knees, they pulled him along that way through the dust until, by his own desperate efforts, he managed to regain his feet. Thirty yards from stoop to telegraph pole, and when Grat had been backed up to the latter and the full forty feet of the lariat so wound around him and the pole that his arms and legs were immovable, the revengeful Jennings abruptly found himself alone with his prisoner. The other punchers were more interested in the fate of the girl.

Grat faced in the direction of the general store. He forgot all about his own predicament as he gazed upon that of Dolly Erath. He could see her plainly, even the terror-stricken features of the girl. She stood under a thick-leafy limb of the tree with a huge hangman's knot under one hair-concealed ear. Two cowboys were keeping her on her feet; there was no doubt that she would have measured her length in the dirt and dust of the street if deprived of their arm support.

While Grat watched, with muscles tensed against the confining rope and eyes starting out of their sockets, Dave Gant led a horse from the saddlers bunched in the middle of the street and halted the animal beside Dolly. She sagged more heavily than ever on the supporting arms on either side; but the men were huskies. They lifted her saddleward.

Joker Jennings, who had for a moment forgotten his prisoner at the pole, completely and morbidly fascinated by the hanging which was about to take place, wheeled at a wild curse from Grat Stockett.

"First time I ever seen a *woman* wearin' a hemp necktie!" declared Joker, laughing harshly at the sight of the other man's face. "Keep your eye on' em, tinhorn. I can see you're sufferin' that-away as much as if you yourself was at that rope's end. Some folks," he admitted maliciously, "strangles quick, an' others kicks awhile."

CHAPTER III

Fast and Furious!

THE bellow of a Colt-gun put a period to Joker Jennings' speech; and, eventually, his life. He whirled around dizzily to face the direction of the shooting, strove to draw, but went to the earth with his fingers still clasped on wooden butt, his gun still in the holster. He lay sprawled out, a repulsive sight, at the feet of the man he had intended gunning while helpless.

"Reckon I'd best cl'ar him outa the way first, Grat!" cried a voice somewhere behind the gambler, unmistakably that of old Red Dog. There was the soft thumping of horses' hoofs, muffled by sand, and next moment the ancient cowboy was alongside Stockett, astride a horse and leading another, saddled. The old man's right hand reached toward the binding, knotted rope; steel flashed in the sun.

"Here!" said Bob, extending the clasp-knife for his gambler friend to take as the hemp fell away from Grat's arms and chest. "Do your legs yourself. I can't reach 'em without quittin' the saddle an' I'm afeared to trust these broncs standin'

alone even with dropped reins. Corral-keeper lent 'em to us!"

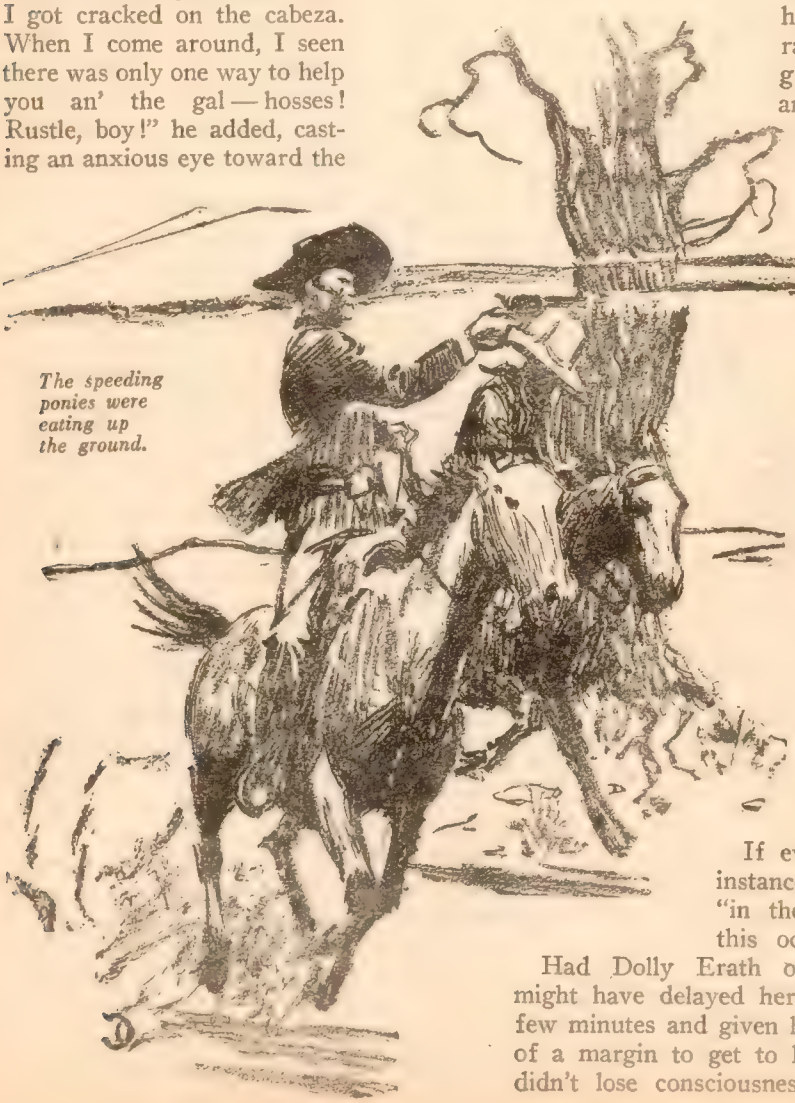
The edge of a bandage showed under Red Dog's low-fitting hat, and he looked pale, rather sick. Evidently Joker Jennings had hit him a nasty clip when the old cowboy tried to prevent the younger one from going up to the roof of the honkatonk.

"Red Dog, I was sure wonderin' what kept you from hornin' into my game, till Jennings slung talk!" exclaimed Grat, as he leaned over and feverishly slashed at the hemp imprisoning his legs.

"Well, then, you know how I got cracked on the cabeza. When I come around, I seen there was only one way to help you an' the gal — hosses! Rustle, boy!" he added, casting an anxious eye toward the tree which shaded the general store. "They is on the p'int o' swingin' her, the damn devils!"

Grat stepped briskly away from the pole. "Got a gun for me?" He had hold of the reins of the led horse as he asked it and vaulted astride.

Red Dog *had* an extra Colt, trust him not to forget that, and he handed it over. Stockett didn't put it in his holster, for the need to use it was immediate. Leaving the body of Joker Jennings where the cowboy had dropped under the accurate pistol-fire of old Red Dog—who shot Joker in the firm belief that he was killing a rattlesnake — the gambler and the ancient range rider galloped for the scene of the hanging.



The speeding ponies were eating up the ground.

A not unadmiring crowd watched them go; indeed, there was hysterical cheering on the part of the dancehall girls, who ran to the center of the sandy road, called a street, the better to view the results of the rescue ride.

If ever there was an instance of saviors being "in the nick of time," this occasion was one. Had Dolly Erath only fainted, she might have delayed her execution not a few minutes and given her rescuers more of a margin to get to her side; but she didn't lose consciousness, oblivion being

denied her just at a time when it would have been welcomed most.

Pete's rope was now slung across the tree limb selected to bear her "dead" weight, and the end of the lariat, which was not fastened to her neck, was clutched by powerful hands, wound around wrists strengthened by leather riding cuffs. And Dave Gant, as relentless as the devil himself, was about to drive the cayuse from beneath the girl when he heard the thundering ponies carrying the rescuers.

The Double L top-hand looked up sharply. A spurt of dust was kicked up an inch from his left foot; Grat Stockett had cut loose, but hadn't the range right, due partly to the jumping motion of his horse. The speeding ponies were eating up the ground; a few yards farther . . .

"Stop 'em, boys!" Dave yelled to those of his men who were not hanging on the rope.

The cowboys in the saddle kicked the spurs into their broncs and heeled about. Some, no doubt, perhaps all, would rather fight men than a helpless woman. Not many among the breed of the frontier were built on the lines of Dave Gant and Joker Jennings—Dave was acting under orders, however.

Grat Stockett, when he saw those riders wheeling in his path, realized that it would be fatal to Dolly Erath for him to be delayed by a mix-up; not taking into consideration that there was better than a gambler's chance he would not emerge from a scrimmage in condition to help himself, let alone the girl. He jerked his borrowed mount at a tangent, reined it suddenly and threw his gun barrel over his left elbow, the arm raised in front of his face. Dave Gant thought he was picked as the gambler's target and dodged back from the hindquarters of the horse which Dolly straddled, jerking his six-shooter.

But Dave was *not* the target; in the brief moment that Grat's bronc was quiet following that sharp reining, the big gambler drew a fine sight on the deadly rope, midway between the bough and the girl's hatless head. The gun spouted three smoky flames, and Pete's riata was a two-piece affair, good for neither legitimate roping nor illegitimate hanging! Tally for Mr. Gratton Stockett! He and Bob Red Dog now had a little extra time to cut through the cowboys coming at them; Dolly could not be swung until another hangman's rope had been rigged up!

But bucking that outfit, which so outnumbered them, did not appeal to Grat; it wasn't that he feared impeding a bullet with fatal result, but he thought the working of a little stratagem would not go amiss here—if it could be worked. He was a hombre who had ever been ready to try things; once, at least. He shouted at Red Dog, to the intense astonishment of that old-timer, who was content that his rack of bones and sunparched hide should wilt in the saddle if such sacrifice would defeat the lynchers.

"Round you come, Bob! They're too many for us!"

And Grat swung his horse about with the utterance, plunging over the back track. He looked across his shoulder once as he fled, to see old Bob pivoting to follow. The punchers were almost on top of the aged cowdog when he decided to imitate Grat by hiking rearward instead of forward; but for some reason their guns were not a-smoke, possibly because he was running from them and refraining from gunplay himself.

Red Dog realized he could do nothing for Dolly "on his lone" and he had no strong hankering to die uselessly. But it stuck in his craw to run, and he was mumbling some things very derogatory to one Gratton Stockett. The man who had spoken so freely about "codes" was not assaying highgrade if Bob were any judge. But he got up speed on the gambler's trail, if for no other reason than to catch him and give him a hefty, hot piece of the Red Dog's seething mind.

Grat paid no attention to the jeers of the women clustered upstreet. He fell like a plummet in their estimation when he tucked tail; for it seemed like nothing else. But the male spectators remained silent; they had absolutely nothing to say about Stockett running when they themselves hadn't the courage to do even as much as he. Grat, it must be admitted, knew

better than anyone what he wanted to do. And a wolf cannot be said to lack courage because it shows its hind legs to the ranch pack.

Stockett quartered across Main Street, bearing to the left, and vanished down a wide alley. He had quit the alley by the time old Red Dog reined his horse's nose into it, but the latter nevertheless followed the lane to its end and all but ran into Grat Stockett, holding steaming mount with a firm hand.

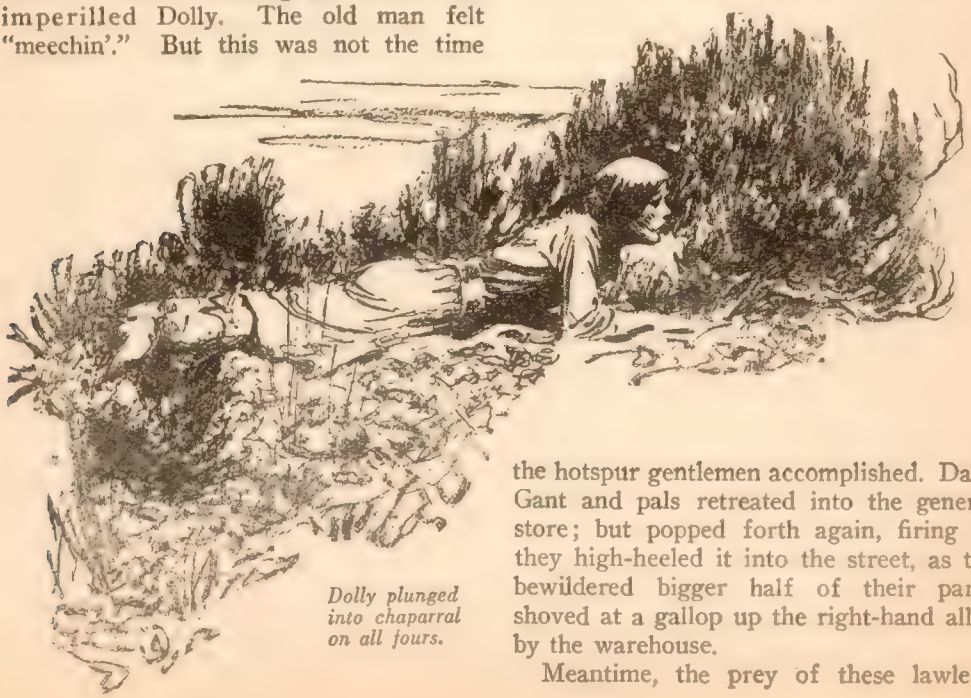
"Showed rotten yellow at a helluva time, Stockett!" snapped the old-timer. "There's that gal back there——"

"I'll forgive you callin' me yellow, Red Dog, 'cause you're ignorant o' what I'm up to," interposed Grat, his eyes flashing. "If we'd collisioned with them fellers head-on, where'd we be? Dead! An' in that case, Dolly Erath wouldn't be long follerin' after us. Here comes that dang gang! We point right back for that tree, circlin'—get me?"

At least Red Dog partly understood. Stockett aimed to put the larger force of their opponents behind them, and so reduce, temporarily, the odds they would have to face in reaching the side of the imperilled Dolly. The old man felt "meechin'." But this was not the time nor place to present apologies; the pursuit could be heard crashing into the alley.

Grat set the pace and the course. While waiting for Bob to catch up with him, he had thoughtfully replaced the spent shells in his gun with three from his belt-loops. He was prepared for six attempts at hit or miss as he spurred his pony, Bob crowding close, around the opposite corner of the Gila Trading Company's warehouse and up another alley, headed streetward. Very like a trail-doubling fox!

As Grat and Red Dog swung into view again on Main Street, shouts from various spectators greeted their appearance. Dave Gant and the several men with him, engaged in the fashioning of another hangman's noose, were not inconsiderably agitated by the reappearance of this troublesome pair who traveled in circles. Straight for that tree pounded Grat and Red Dog, one hand of each exercising a red-tongued, cannon-toned Colt, the other hand gripping short-bunched reins. Whether they did deadly execution was not of so much moment to the rescuing riders, as that the men standing in Dolly's vicinity should be scattered. And this last the shooting of



Dolly plunged into chaparral on all fours.

the hotspur gentlemen accomplished. Dave Gant and pals retreated into the general store; but popped forth again, firing as they high-heeled it into the street, as the bewildered bigger half of their party shoved at a gallop up the right-hand alley by the warehouse.

Meantime, the prey of these lawless,

and worse than lawless rangemen, was being carried beyond their murderous reach. Nothing but her scarf was around Dolly's neck as Grat gained her side; her hands were laced tightly at her back with a saddle-string. Such men as Dave Gant did not often disgrace the frontier! A woman-handler was considered low as a snake!

"Hang on with your knees, Dolly!" cried Stockett, and stabbed a hand for the grounded reins of her mount as he passed its head. In the other hand he held his gun — empty. And while guiding her horse, there would be no opportunity for him to reload.

Red Dog, however, unencumbered with the girl, was putting the finishing touches to a clever rout as he racked along in rear-guard position. He confessed to himself that his eye and hand were not as sure, drilling from the hurricane deck of a bronc, as they once were; he made a sad little bet with himself that the only notch he could cut for a "kill" so far was the one representing Joker Jennings.

By the time that edge of town was achieved, Grat and the girl and Red Dog could look back and get unpleasant thrills in plenty, if they so desired. The gang, with one exception, the man put afoot by reason of Dolly going off on his horse, had hit the grit after the trio.

"You got any idear where we're a-headin' to?" demanded Red Dog as they burned up the southern trending road. His knees hugging the saddle, he surged alongside Grat and the girl, hands busy refilling his faithful old Colt. The gambler had drawn Bob's knife from his pocket and was cutting the saddle-string on Dolly's wrists, without slackening the pace of their horses.

"Danged if I do, Red Dog," replied Stockett. "You know this country. I'm prett' near a stranger. But what we want to find is good standin' ground or a good hide-out. I'd vote to make it a finish fight with them pole-pussies if we had an extra belt o' cartridges per each!"

"Hidin' would be best this here time, I opine, though it ain't in my nature to do a heap o' holin' up," said Bob. "Them meat-jerkers ain't goin' to give us up easy, damn 'em! Angel, you shore must have a whangin' story up your sleeve, showin' why them hombres was so locoed to hang a woman, which the same ain't a frequent crime on this man's border I'm glad to say."

"You can bet your life, old Bob, and I'll tell it soon as we're anyways near safe," said the girl, into whose cheeks the color was slowly returning, though she was well aware they were riding in "the valley of the shadow."

Thick brush lined the road on both sides, almost with the regularity of hedges. It gave Grat Stockett food for thought as they raced, maintaining a lead of several hundred yards over their yip-yipping pursuers. He made a suggestion to his companions which they received with exclamations of approval before he had finished; and he added:

"We'll try it when we reach that bend ahead. Puts us afoot, but I'm leery them pole-pussies would run us down final an' we won't be so far from the Crossin', we can't get other horses. They'd have some job beatin' all this brush if they don't know where we get off. What's behind this tangle on the right, Bob?"

"Broken lands; but the chaparral runs for a hundred yards an' more most places."

They came to the bend, and a last glimpse of Dave Gant's party showed the cowpunchers had not appreciably crawled up, though flaying their horses ceaselessly. Once around the turn, the trio rode a trifle closer to the brush than heretofore. Grat slipped the stirrups from his feet and cried:

"I'll go first. Don't let your feet touch the trail if you can help it, folks! Careful o' your old bones, Bob!"

"Oh, I reckon they ain't so brittle!" snorted Red Dog.

Grat swung his left leg over to the right side of the saddle, poised for an instant in this sidewise position, gathering his muscles, then launched himself toward the brush. He landed in the tangle a couple of feet from the edge of it, falling on hands and knees. Branches and twigs cracked and broke under his weight; he

heaved himself upright and picked up his hat just as Dolly Erath plunged in imitation of him, crashing into the chaparral on all fours, a little beyond the spot where Grat stood. And Red Dog made his leap a second later, proving that there was a deal of "spring" left in his old body.

It was neat adaptation of an old trick of Indians and Indian-fighters, this method of trail-blinding. There wasn't a single foot-sign in the trail dust to show that the trio had left the saddle, and when the brush, broken by their hurtling bodies, had been rearranged into a semblance of its original uprightness, it would need Indian eyes or at least minute examination by white man's eyes, to discover the breakage. The horses ran on along the road as if still backed by riders; it wasn't to be expected that they would travel far riderless, but a few moments of forward movement, to lure the cowpunchers, was all that Grat and his friends required of them.

None of the three had sustained hurt beyond a few scratches. Dolly scrambled over toward Stockett, her knee-length boots and divided skirts protecting her legs. Red Dog followed after; he had shoved the bushes crushed by his leap into deceiving near-verticalness and, passing the spot where Dolly landed, quickly reared the telltale, flattened shrubbery there.

When the pursuers roared around the bend, Grat, Red Dog and Dolly were crouched back of a screen of chaparral, the men with guns in fists, though there was small likelihood of their hiding-place being discovered. The cowboys dashed on down the road, trailing hoofbeats, which suddenly stopped. There came a loud hail from the southward, answering shouts from nearer at hand, and Dave Gant was plainly heard to say:

"Hello, Sheriff!"

"Oh, Sheriff Hickson! Now we're all right!" exclaimed Dolly Erath. She would have risen from crouching position between the two men, but Grat restrained her with hand on shoulder.

"What do you reckon you're goin' to do, Dolly? This Sheriff Hickson is mebbe okay an' again mebbe he ain't; like Colonel Lightner ain't no damn good!"

The girl turned surprised eyes upon him. "How did you guess it about Lightner; or did you know something?"

"Guessed. Made a stab an' hit center, I reckon. I think he savvies I'm onto him, too. We have a bet up between us." He sketchily told her about it, talking in a low tone of voice.

"Well, you're certainly a grand guesser, Grat Stockett; although it seems to me more like you must have second sight," declared the girl. "Which reminds me I ain't told you why I was running from those fellows. I bought a ranch near Lightner's place from Rattler Jones——"

"We know about that!" interrupted Red Dog impatiently. "Go on from there, Dolly."

"Sure. But who told you? Lightner? Well, boys, that so-called baron is nothing but a low-down thief. He's the one that's been rustling all the time. I found out there's not more'n a hundred head of cows on his range; he's had 'em all driven into Mexico, along with a sight more that didn't belong to him. He's aiming to set up in business across the border, I reckon, and to clean up from the other herds in the Basin before he goes. And he's planning to rob the Crossing bank, what's more——"

"Just as I thought!" chuckled Grat. "You recollect I says to him, Red Dog, that our stake money would be safer in The Full Blast safe than that bank's vault? Figgerin' him as the feller who was preyin' on the county an' bustin' it flat, I didn't put it past him to Jess Jim a bank he was director of. See how it works out? He's grabbin' all the dogies an' dinero that keeps Grass Basin a real live cattle range, an' leavin' Basin folks to hang crape on their ears after the dust settles. A deep, slick pole-puss, just like I numbered him. The hombre that other folks looks up to as a cross between a tin-god an' Santy Claus, is the sport I usually spot for makin' dirty plays."

"Grat, I'm shore glad you come to the Basin before it was too late. But what we goin' to do about it?" Red Dog pulled

off his hat and rubbed his bandage, in lieu of scratching his head, worriedly. "Most folks in this here commoonity are too dang chicken-hearted to stack up against Lightner, even if they'd believe wrong o' him. You seen evidence o' the chicken-heart stuff a while ago, with Dolly all but lynched while everybody stood around holdin' their breath."

"Don'tcha think I ain't goin' to yank the baron's fangs, just the same. How I'll do it I'll have to think over some. I'm aimin' to collect bet money an' reward both, an' a scalp to boot!" Grat delivered himself thus with a grin, but there was no humor in his eyes. "How, Dolly, did you pile your rope onto this info?"

"Went over to see Lightner on business—he'd told me to come any time I was stuck—and I overheard him talking to Dave Gant in the house while I stood at the front screen door, porch side. I went right away and back to my ranch, to try and figure out what I should do, knowing that the word of a girl against a cattle baron's wouldn't weigh very heavy. I thought nobody at the Double L had seen me, but they must've, for I hadn't unsaddled my pony when I saw the gang coming. I lit out for the Crossing and you, Grat. The rest you know."

"What about that talk they'd seen you ridin' with rustlers? Just talk, an excuse for puttin' a rope on your neck?"

"Absolutely! Nothing else. They hadn't a thing on me, but they'd have sworn to that story, an' most any jury in these parts would've believed them, had it got as far as a regular trial. Why, Grat, the punchers on the Double L ain't doing a stroke of work; just hanging on the payroll to attend to Lightner's low-down for him until he's ready for the final raid, which I reckon will be on the bank. Some strangers in that gang, I noticed, and if they're not imported gunfighters I never took a slug of whiskey!"

"Shush!" warned Red Dog at this juncture. "Here's that lousy crowd comin' back ag'in an' there's Hickson's voice raised some."

Above the beat of pony hoofs returning along the road, the three in the chaparral heard Clem Hickson, the sheriff, known of course to Red Dog and Dolly, say:

"I reckon the wisest course is for me to point back to the hills, warn the boys there an' get them cattle o' Clint's on the move to Mexico. If that gal should be able to spread what she knows, enough folks might believe her to make it damned dangerous for us to stick around; though I reckon I'd be safer than any o' you others, even Clint hisself, account o' me bein' sheriff." There was a throaty laugh. "Don't waste time pokin' brush for them people hereabouts. They give you the slip slick, doubled back on their trail an' are headin' for the Crossin', you can gamble your blues. Thing for you fellers to do is ride there yourselves an' keep eyes peeled for any o' the three to show up. Kill on sight an' I'll back you up when I come back.

"Make no fool mistakes no more with hangin's. Use your guns. Let Clint know where I've gone. He may want to shift the date for lootin' the bank. An' you might's well take these three hosses to camp—one has your brand, Dave."

There was some small talk from Gant, merely agreeing with everything "Sheriff" Hickson had said. Then ensued "so-longs," the clip-clopping of a pony galloping south. There went the sheriff. And the defeated lynchers re-passed the hiding place of the fugitives, going north.

CHAPTER IV

The Lure of a Campfire

"WHAT hills do you reckon that pole-pusser sheriff was alludin' at?" asked Grat of Red Dog, squatting easily on his heels.

"Ain't no doubtin' he meant the Pintos. They're the biggest range of 'em down that-a-way. Why?"

"I'm goin' there to stop them cattle from reachin' the Mexico side o' the border—somehow. I can find the hills all right. I know about where they are. Thing that'll bother me will be to locate the rustler camp. But I'm a good li'l seek-an'-finder, folks. By the time I can get a change o' clothes—cowboy togs—a hoss

an' on the trail, Mr. Hickson will be halfway to his gang, else I'd shadder him. Too dang bad we had to give up our ponies."

"How 'bout a pardner? I know them Pinto Hills up an' down an' across."

Grat debated a moment in silence. He would like to have along a man on whom he could absolutely rely in a pinch, and old Red Dog was such a man; but the gambler didn't believe the aged cowboy could stand the rigors of the rustler hunt, and it would be folly to cumber himself with a partner who might fail physically when the "doin's" were liveliest. Yet he avoided unnecessary insult to Red Dog by stating a very different reason for not hooking up with him.

"One of us has got to look after Dolly. I know she thinks she can take care of herself an' so she could, under ordinary circumstances. But you heard what the sheriff told them Double L hounds to do, Bob. The Crossin' is goin' to be danged unsafe an' Dolly's ranch the same. What's come o' your cowboys, Dolly?"

The wary Grat Stockett was taken unawares.

"There was only three on the payroll when I closed my deal with Rattler Jones," replied the girl, who was sitting cross-legged between them in the thicket. "You couldn't expect 'em to take up for me against that Lightner gang. For all that I know, they may have gone over to the other side by now. Guess there won't be a dogie left on my range."

"You'll get back all that belongs to you, Dolly, if it happens they been rustled. Now, Red Dog, my idear is that you an' the girl oughta know of somebody at the Crossin' who'd be willin' to hide you until I back-trail from the Pintos. Know such a party, either of you?"

Dolly didn't. She refrained from saying so, but thought it likely her recent employment would brand her an outcast, deemed unfit to be harbored by any of the families in camp, even though she had severed connection with The Full Blast and meant to tread a narrow road hereafter. But Red Dog knew someone — the keeper of the general store, whose big shade tree had so nearly become a gallows.

"Frank's got nice livin' quarters back o' the store," said Red Dog, "an' he'd be glad to do me—us—a favor. Good place to stay under cover. But I don't admire this holin' up business, Grat, as I told you once."

"You don't need to be altogether idle, old-timer, an' I won't be away long—'nless they get me. Your palaver of hidin' in the store shoots me another idear. We want to recruit a bunch o' men who'll stand on their legs manlike for law an' order; long enough, anyways, to help us save the bank when Lightner comes to raid her. You an' your friend Frank must know all the folks around here, an' the store is a place where everybody drops

in. Have Frank spot the ones he thinks would join us in spoilin' the bank stick-up, an' sneak 'em to you in the back room, where you can talk things over with them. But be careful not to let it get out that you an' Dolly are in town."

"Shore. That recruitin' notion is aces, Grat. I'll do my best. But I'll be achin' to be with you on that scrappin' trail. How about The Full Blast? Goin' to let her run bossless?"

"Have to, for a while. But if my plans work out, we'll both be back there on the job in jig-time. An' there won't be any more danger o' the camp slidin' to hell when we're through. Now, amigos, let's get started. There's a lot to be done if we're to checkmate Colonel Lightnin'!"

They footed it through the brush and broken country to the Crossing, halting when they reached the outskirts of the camp at the suggestion of Red Dog.

"There's the back door o' Frank's place," he said, pointing. "Best let me do the Injun act, have a talk with the old boy an' see how the land lays. Them Double L hellers might be in the store. Lay low, folks, while I'm scoutin'."

To reach the back door in question, he would be obliged to cross the open for more than a hundred yards; but there was not much danger of him being discovered unless someone inimical to the trio chanced to look out of a rear window of shanty home or false-fronted 'dobe-and-frame business place. Grat and Dolly sat down in the shelter of a rock pile to await his return.

The result of Red Dog's reconnoitering was satisfactory. Frank, the storekeeper, had expressed himself as being very willing to aid the cause. The Double L boys had ridden past his store, presumably en route to The Full Blast to tank up; liquor might not increase their gunning efficiency or general keenness, but it would certainly make the hours of their vigil pass more pleasantly. After he and Dolly had been welcomed in the living quarters of the store proprietor, who was a bachelor, Grat talked "horse" and "outfit."

"I want a cowboy rig, like I'm really more used to wearin', in place o' what I got on, chiefly because I'm aimin' to play waddie," explained Grat. "You see, this Hickson has never seen my face, but I've been described to him as a gambler, I ain't doubtin'. So a change o' outfit will be disguise a-plenty. I'll buy——"

"You don't need to," poked in the storekeeper. "I sell everything that a cowdog wears, an' I'm glad to loan you what you'll need. Pretty big man, but I reckon I got your size. From what Red Dog tells me, if you scotch the big snake o' this distric', you'll be savin' business from goin' dead, doin' me a favor, tharfore, as much as anybody in the Basin. I want to show I'm grateful. An' I reckon I can Injun a good cayuse around to the back door without them blasted Lightner devils catchin' on. It'll be my own bronc, which I'll recommend him as bein' able to match a hoof with thoroughbreds an' run longer. Just the kind o' hoss you're needin'. I'll fix you up a package o' eats, too."

Stockett finally hit the trail south, without having once been in peril during his furtive visit at the Crossing. When he said good-bye to Dolly, she had looked at him and gripped his hand in such a fashion as to make him think hard as he single-footed through the broken lands, intending to strike the road over which Sheriff Clem Hickson had earlier racked to warn his rustling amigos.

"Danged if that girl ain't half in love with me," mused the big gambler, who didn't look like one now. "I sure never thought o' her in just that way myself; I'd 'a' stood up for any woman same's I did for her—it's the code o' the cow camps. She's nice-lookin', if she did foller the hall game, an' I reckon she'd make a good wife for a hombre an' never slip again if she had the chance to wear a real weddin' ring. Yessir! Damn few men have been such plumb saints they can kick a woman who's been down. It sure ain't in the code to kick one an' mebbe—mebbe I've been a bachelor long enough. Quien sabe?"

His thoughts eventually veered around to the rustler subject; and the farther south he got the deeper grew his concentration. The Pinto Hills, probably so

called from the splotches of vivid color which arrested the eye beholding them distantly, loomed up, saw-toothing the horizon, about mid-afternoon. Grat hadn't troubled to try to find the tracks Sheriff Hickson's pony hoofed in the turf going south. He would have lost them, anyway. He placed reliance in his own wits and the favor of Lady Luck.

By the time the amateur rustler hunter (and not such an amateur considering his cowboys days, in which the human wolf of the ranges had largely figured) had ridden within the shadow of the first plains-squatting hills, he had hit upon a scheme for bringing about a meeting between himself and the elusive Basin outlaws. He wanted to find them before nightfall; and it would take more time than he cared to use up, to comb the Pintos thoroughly. No doubt the cattle thieves' retreat was well hidden, even if it were only a sort of way-station on the trail to old Mexico.

He had thought at first of scaling one of the hills most likely to afford him a comprehensive view of the surrounding eminences, or rather the draws and trails between them, and watch for a campfire; but rejected it, though this thought was the embryo of the plan he did adopt. It was to be supposed the waddies would not eat until about the hour that darkness set in. The smoke of their fire would then be invisible. Even should they kindle one while daylight lasted, in all probability such tinder-dry brush would be used that the vapor couldn't be spotted in the sky.

Since the outlaws, therefore, were bound to be careful not to advertise their presence by smoke, it almost certainly followed that smoke from another point in the hills than their own camp would arouse curiosity, cause speculation, and, in the end, investigation. Thus figured Gratton Stockett and he scanned the tops of the Pintos, as well as a man on the level could, for the highest one among them.

Locating what he wanted, he turned his horse upslope, riding at an angle which kept his back pressed firmly against the cantle. Near the summit, feeling all cowboy again and with thoughts of gaming tables far away indeed, he grounded the reins and poked about in search of fairly green brush. It was not such an easy matter to find it, as the sun had full play on the hill-tops, day in, day out, with very little interruption from rain. He heaped together, in a small pocket, several armloads of stuff which would give off considerable smoke when lighted. Finally he put a match to the mass, fanning it with his hat until it was thoroughly and evenly ignited.

"I better make it look as if I'm gettin' ready to grub, or the visitors I'm expectin' will beef me pronto on suspicion," he muttered, as he went to the saddlebags which the storekeeper had filled. While Grat had said he didn't expect to be gone long on this trail, old Frank had known men to commit unintentional error by such statements, and had included, among other things, a small tin pot and a pound of coffee. Also, a canteen of water, so that Grat would not have to bother holding to the few stream courses in the parched territory he was destined to traverse.

It felt like old times on the cattle range again to be making coffee in the open, even though Grat did not expect to drink much of it. He set the pot on a big stone on one side of the flames, and occupied himself watching the numerous trails snaking and looping and vanishing beneath him. The smoke was spiraling thickly skyward. It could be seen for a goodly distance, no doubt of that; and if it didn't lure company to the hill on which Grat squatted, then he was ready to swear there was not an outlaw in the Pintos. There was a remote chance, of course, that Red Dog had been mistaken about which range the sheriff had meant.

Grat thought that two eyes, normally keen and alert, were enough to spot anyone making for his hill, but Sheriff Clem Hickson proved what a wily foe he was by pulling the Injun act on Stockett as if it were something brand-new in plains-craft. The sheriff came out of a certain draw at a moment when Grat's gaze was focused in another direction. Hickson didn't know this, of course, but took a chance that he hadn't been observed by whoever was invading the rustler country

and left his horse out of sight at the foot of the eminence, where it couldn't be seen because of the gradual increase of the hill's girth, the nearer it got groundward.

On his belly, wriggling snakewise, selecting for his ascent the side of the hill which, by reason of its numerous irregularities, offered the most advantages of cover, Clem Hickson pawed and legged himself up and up and up. He was ready to "freeze" the instant there was the smallest hint the person or persons above saw him, crawling fly-fashion with an uncomfortable drop below. Even when he was within a few rods of Grat's browse-seeking horse, and not a bullet had whined its notice of discovery in his ear, Hickson wouldn't have banked on it very heavily that he hadn't been detected; the other man, or men, might be waiting to feed him a dose of lead as he rose to his feet, in the clear. Therefore, Mr. Hickson went the full route to the summit, where the pocket smoked and the coffee boiled, on hands and knees.

The wary Grat Stockett was taken unawares. He wheeled from studying the panorama of the Pintos to see a man creeping past his horse, which, since Grat was a new master, evidently had not seen fit to forewarn him, by so much as a snort, that anyone was near.

"Put your hands up, feller!" said Clem Hickson, in a most matter-of-fact tone, getting to his feet with gun trained on Grat's heart as the bigger man turned and faced him.

"Company, huh?" retorted Mr. Stockett, very creditably concealing any chagrin he may have felt at having his gun in his holster at such a time. Otherwise, he certainly could not be disappointed to behold Mr. Hickson, badman of the law. The campfire had lured with a vengeance! But Grat didn't put his hands up as bidden, as the sheriff, silver-plated star ashine as if it meant something, walked closer.

"Call it company if that makes you feel any better, rustler," quoth Clem Hickson. "But how about them hands?"

"Did you want to borrow 'em?" said Grat, with a marvelously straight face. "Only pair I got, sorry. From the look o' you, Sheriff, you're mad now. Ain'tcha, Well, I'm a li'l deaf an' I didn't quite catch——"

"The bridle's tight on bein' funny!" snorted Clem, halting in his long and rapid stride. He had come close enough he judged. He should know, being an old and expert hand at games involving gunplay.

"All right, no more foolin' then," Grat said in a different voice and scowling. "That goes for you, too. I recognize that you're a sheriff, but what the hell right you got pesterin' me? I was goin' to take your drop as a joke, but if you won't have it that way, it's O. K. with me. What've I done?"

"This is a rustler section an' I'm takin' in on suspicion all hombres campin' round here," was the amazing retort of Mr. Hickson.

"The hell you say! Well, I'm a honest driftin' puncher an' I don't crave to see the inside o' no jail." Yet this playing for time, with the hope that something would turn up in his favor, availed Grat nothing.

The sheriff edged in to collect his prisoner's gun and, situated as he was, with the muzzle of the other's Colt prodding his middle, there was nothing Grat could do but submit. He wondered just what this crooked peace officer intended doing with him; whether the man really thought him a stranger cattle thief or someone snooping, or. . . . A dozen questions puzzled the cowboy gambler.

"How about that coffee I was boilin', Sheriff? I'm hongry," he said.

"You'll eat later. Got no time to waste over that now. As for the coffee. . . ." Hickson backed away from Grat toward the burning pocket, still gazing at him over the gunsights.

Clem completed his sentence by acting; he kicked backward and upset the pot on the fire, the spilling contents partly extinguishing the flames. "So much for that," said Hickson. "What's left o' the fire I won't bother puttin' out, 'cause it shore can't spread from that pocket. Hombre, just you take a pasear down this side o' the hill that I come up. I'll fetch your hoss an' be right behind you, gun p'intin'

plumb between your shoulders. Mosey!"

Grat moved slowly downslope. The sheriff came after him, catching up the reins of the storekeeper's horse as he passed it. There was something familiar about the animal, now that Hickson could look at it more attentively. He nodded his head, noted more particularly the proportions of the cowboy figure stalking before him, and the light of understanding glowed in Clem's close-set eyes. He'd made a good guess who this unknown was, recalling what Dave Gant had said about the size of the gambler, who seemed bent on supporting the principles of law and order. Despite his star, Mr. Hickson was of course not in favor of anyone who upheld principles so inimical to his own interests.

"Not that . . . no!"

As he tracked down the side of the hill, Grat's wits were functioning keenly enough. If the sheriff meant to take him to the rustler camp, that was all right; he had set it as his goal. But he didn't wish to go as a prisoner. Yet apparently he was destined to do so. For him to hope of jumping through the eye of a needle seemed about as feasible as contriving to reverse the present situation.

Yet he did not give up thinking of escape—not he! And when they had gone nearly halfway to the level, Hickson walking close on the heels of his captive, with the horse dragging, sometimes sliding, behind the sheriff at reins' end, Grat Stockett was inspired. On account of the steep pitch of the hillside, Hickson was necessarily inches above him. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

Quick as the thought came to him, he dropped on all fours, twisting sidewise. The move was entirely unexpected to Hickson, and he was so hard upon Grat's heels that before he could stop himself, his legs crashed into Grat's ribs and, gun exploding downhill, he flipped clear across the kneeling man's back. The horse halted. Grat scrambled around in a flash and pounced upon the sprawling officer, reaching far over his head for the outflung arm which terminated in a gun.

"I'm bossin' this job now!" rapped Stockett, poking into Hickson's bull neck the gun torn from the sheriff's fingers. "If you'll behave I'll let you up!"

"Shore!" gasped Mr. Hickson and was immediately relieved of that crushing weight on his spine. He thought he still had an ace to play. As he rose to hands and knees, the right hand, which was the one farthest from Grat, thrust under him for the six-gun of Stockett, hung in the sheriff's trouser-band. The weapon had slipped pretty far down in his pants and was not easily withdrawn; but even had he been able to jerk it out quicker, it is doubtful if he could have used it; Grat hadn't forgotten that gun. He kicked the sheriff suddenly in the ribs and with a gasp Hickson sagged sideways and rolled on his back. Grat stooped and secured the Colt.

"When you're done cryin'," said Grat, holstering his gun and keeping the sher-

iff's own unsheathed to "persuade" him, "get up an' we'll be movin'—to your rustler camp."

Actually there were tears in Hickson's eyes, involuntary tears induced by the pain of that swift swung boot-toe. When Grat sprung that last sentence, however, he sat up, his aching ribs a minor matter, indeed. "*My* rustler camp!"

"Listen: I'm one o' them three people that Dave Gant's gang was chasin' when they met you in the road near the Crossin', Hickson. We overheard enough o' what you said to 'em to know that you're a damned crook, along with Clint Lightnin'. Is he your boss, or are you pardners in this cattle stealin'?"

"I guessed awhile back you was that gambler! You come out here lookin' for me, huh?"

"Feller, you done said it. An' you say *gambler* as if it was somethin' grades below a rustler even. Don'tcha think it in my case, bozo. I'm no cold-game hombre. I've got a line on that thievin' baron, an' you bet his game's up in this neck o' cactus land. C'mon, Hick. I want you to introduce me to your playmates an' show me them dogies that was to be moved to Mexico."

"They're gone, the boys an' the cattle." Hickson evidently saw there was no use to deny he was hooked up with the cow lifters who had got Grass Basin in a hole.

"You're a liar, mister! They ain't had time to get started, an' even if they had, we could catch 'em easy before they crossed the line. Say, you an' the colonel sure played a slick game to fool the Basin ranchers, him bawling you out every chance that you couldn't catch a cold, an' you purtendin' to be off huntin' rustlers! You ain't told me if you're just a lieutenant or his pardner in cleanin' up this range, but that can wait. Right pronto you're goin' to lead me——"

"Try'n' make me!" snarled Hickson, slowly straightening.

"Mulish, eh?" said Grat. A pause; then: "All right."

Careful to keep the sheriff covered, he ambled sidewise to pick up the reins of his horse, then ordered the sheriff downhill, to where the latter's horse could now be seen standing. When they reached the animal, the gunless crook was about to mount when Grat spoke sharply:

"You're goin' to ride a different way, man; heap different. No use bluffin' I'll gun you to make you open trap, 'cause dead you'd never tell; but I know somethin' else to work the charm, slick as Apache torture. You says, 'try'n' make me' an' I'm sure takin' you up on it."

While talking, he stepped a pace backward from the head of his horse, stretched a hand for the tie-straps on his riata and soon had the rope-coil loose. He shook it out and approached the staring sheriff with the noose hanging open. As he flipped it over Hickson's head, the latter suspected what Grat intended doing and cried out:

"Not that . . . no!"

"Yes, that!" grunted Stockett, and while exerting gun pressure on the sheriff's muscular anatomy to hold him still in his tracks, he pulled the loop down almost to Clem's belt-line. "Lift your arms! Won't do no good to hold 'em tight against you that-a-way!" As Hickson relaxed the rigidly held members, Grat hauled the noose up under the armpits and taut across the sheriff's back and chest.

Then he circled Mr. Hickson, who showed a little pale through his tan, grabbed the reins of the sheriff's pony and towed it toward his own mount; and all the while Clem's own gun covered him. The big gambler topped the saddle, dallied rope on horn, and only when his horse's hoofs began to stir the dust in response to a light touch of the spur, did he tuck the extra gun in his waistband.

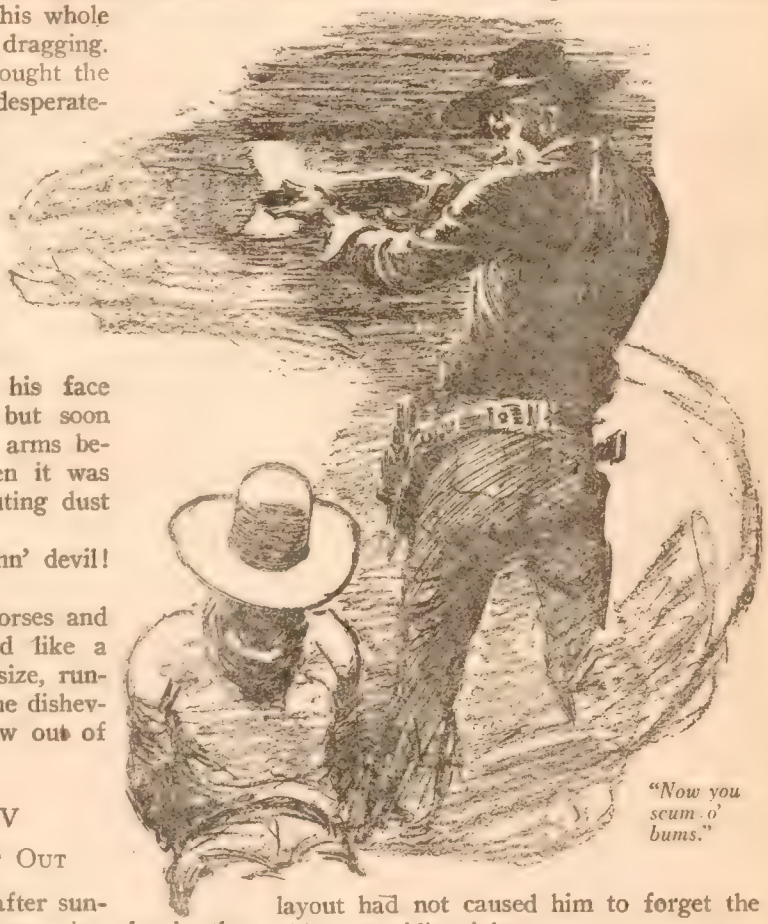
The sheriff loped at the heels of the two pace-matching horses, mule-jawed in spite of his fear. Soon Grat had whipped up the mounts, following trail around the tallest hill and on to the next, so that Clem Hickson was running his fastest. He could not keep this up long. But his mouth stayed closed. Grat perched sideways in the saddle, one knee hooked up, so that he could the more easily cast his eyes alternately forward and behind. Such measures as he was taking were stringent,

even brutal, he was willing to admit, and there was no love of brutality in his make-up; but it was far from being as bad as trying to hang a woman! Hickson didn't deserve much consideration or soft handling.

The flying feet of the horses and the man on the rope beat a rhythmic tattoo for many yards of the dusty trail. Then the man abruptly lost his footing; the pace was too furious! He crashed down on his knees, and then his whole body stretched out, dragging. His frantic hands sought the taut rope, held to it desperately. The noose was nearly cutting him in two, for he was not a lightweight and his full hundred and ninety pounds — or most of it — bore upon the hemp. He struggled to keep his face above the ground, but soon the strength of his arms began to falter. Then it was that he yelled, spouting dust from his throat:

"I'll tell, you damn' devil! Stop!"

Grat halted the horses and dropped groundward like a panther despite his size, running back to lever the dishevveled thief of the law out of the alkali.



"Now you scum o' bums."

CHAPTER V

Grat Shoots It Out

IT was two hours after sunrise the following morning; locale, the Pinto Hills. Grat Stockett came riding around a low eminence on Frank's pony, his destination the long, log shack set in the midst of numerous high corrals. Here was rustler headquarters, to which Sheriff Hickson had piloted him the afternoon previous. Those corrals, now empty, had been jammed to pole-bursting with cattle bearing various Grass Basin brands, when Stockett had first glimpsed them.

Practically all night long had he worked, shoving bunches of steers through the hills, so that they would drift back upon the Basin ranges. The rustlers would have to institute another round-up if they intended driving any of that beef into Mexico. Double L's had been among them, but Grat was careless of whose dogies he happened to be punching out of the Pintos. The time he had spent behind a faro layout had not caused him to forget the old range riding job.

For a very good reason had he been able to accomplish all this without interruption — the rustling gang was not at home. Sheriff Clem Hickson went so far as to say he was "right sore" at the bunch for traipsing off, probably to get drunk at a little border hamlet, on the American side. By the time they got back it would be too late to "run" the cattle.

Grat was highly pleased with himself as he rode cabinward in the warm sun, which soon would grow too warm; he was tired and would have enjoyed mightily a few hours in a blanket on the soft side of a floor, but the cattle thieves were due to return any moment and to be caught napping would prove fatal, surely. Grat was sticking around to gather in the thieves themselves, having attended to the cattle —a laudable purpose but one of serious proportions for one lone man.

The cowboy gambler threaded his way among the cow-shy corrals to the front door of the headquarters shack; there was a clearing of several square yards between pens and house here. He swung down the reins as he dismounted, scanning the earth before the door for fresh "sign" of iron-shod hoofs, which he hardly expected to find, but took the precaution to look for.

"Gang ain't here yet, eh, Hicky?" he said, stepping into the shack and addressing the hog-tied figure of the hot-collared Clem, who had spent the most miserable night of his life on the floor, listening to the hoofs of cattle going back home—which was the wrong direction, according to Clem, who had worn out many ponies in helping to rustle them.

"Hicky" didn't like this shortening of his name by his captor. But what was the use in kicking? There wasn't the smallest thing about the whole situation that he did like. He merely grunted in reply to Grat, but as that was practically the kind of answer expected from him, no objection was raised by the gentleman who held the whip-hand.

Stockett was ready to shout that the rustlers lived "fat." The larder was well stocked and he helped himself freely to take the edge off the appetite he had acquired since supping last night in this same room. He had the consideration to feed the sheriff, too, keeping ever alert for sounds of approaching horses.

A surprise party was something he had no hankering after. Hickson said there were eleven men in the crowd, but Grat judged this a lie, for the purpose of undermining his morale. Probably there were fewer, and yet enough to give him the fight of his life.

When he had eaten, he loaded a Winchester .45-.90, which the outlaws had kindly left behind, from a box of shells on the window-sill; and stood this reliable weapon against a bench. Next he closed and barred the rude wooden shutter of the only window in the cabin. The place had been constructed with the possibility in mind of the real forces of the law attacking it some day; there were frequent "loops" for six-gun and rifle in the stout walls.

A crashing in the brush, swift staccato of many horses coming, drew Grat's attention just as he had concluded preparations for being stormed. A voice roared:

"Where in hell's them cattle?"

"That's Old Hyde. He's shore the sport that'll give you what-for, blackleg," remarked the sheriff, on a vicious note, from his corner captivity. "I'm lookin' for you to drop proper sudden."

Grat made no reply. He had both his own gun and Hickson's at his hips, and now he snatched up the Winchester and trailed forth over the doorstep. He halted not so far from the door that he couldn't leap back inside if his bluff to "run" the cattle thieves fell down.

He faced a bunch of horsemen snaking houseward through the jumbled corrals. They numbered exactly eleven.

"Quite a-plenty," he murmured, giving his attention particularly to a burly man in the lead, one some years younger than Bob Red Dog, but old enough to have white hair and a surplus of wrinkles which were not all of the sun's making. This hard citizen was blaspheming at every lift of his pony's feet, and as it was the same voice Grat had listened to while in the cabin, there could be no doubt he was gazing upon "Old Hyde," border hellion extraordinary—if Hickson spoke the truth concerning him.

The leathery old gent fairly hurled himself from the saddle when he had arrived a certain distance from the door, and waddled forward, hands swinging in suggestive proximity to his double burden of hardware. He called the stranger in his

path all the names he could put tongue to in a brief space—and certainly there were some original, hot ones—interlarding the torrent of verbal lava with the query, "Where's my dogies?"

"*You* don't own no hide but your own, pop!" Stockett forced speech into the other's prolonged vocal effort. "Shut up, damn you, an' stop comin'."

"You orderin' me around on my own stampin' ground, by God!" the white-haired old pirate pealed. He would have hauled his young cannon into concerted action had not the raised Winchester in Mr. Stockett's capable-looking paws drawn an undoubted bead on the Hyde heart. "Who are you, you close-clammed, big jerk? An' if you know anything about these here dead-card corrals, yap 'er out!"

"You fellers on the hosses," said Grat, ignoring Old Hyde's interrogations and addressing the others over his head, "don't trouble to slip your stirrups. I was waitin' for you all to come so's we could slide into the Crossin' together—the party to include our honored sheriff, who at present is learnin', just as a bronc does at bustin' time, that you can't fight rope——"

"Hickson a prisoner?" snarled Hyde. "I might 'a' knowed, though. Keerful, boys, about the itch in your derned fingers," he said, over his shoulder. "I want to satisfy myself is this guy as nervy as he seems or just a loco-eater. Tell me, you—"

"The handle is Stockett," supplied Grat, and forthwith enlightened Old Hyde on the subject of the missing cows. Though Grat related only the simple facts, Old Hyde and the men with him read between the lines, and were men of the type to appreciate iron-clad nerve even in an enemy who had deprived each of them of a big piece of change by his nocturnal, anti-rustler activities.

Old Hyde settled some dust with a huge squirt of amber from his hairy lips. "Rather have a hard case like you with us than against us. You won't get as much money out o' this thing actin' foolish an' law-abidin' as you would actin' sensible an' lawless. We can corral them dogies again if we shake a spur——"

"You're 'way off about the dinero, old two-horns. I've got a bet with that buzzard of a Lightner I can catch him at red-handed crookin'."

Hyde looked incredulous a moment; then he half smiled. It gave a weird slant to his forbidding features. "Know about the baron, too, do you? A smart jigger, I'll say. Well, that shoves you up a coupla pegs in my kindly reckonin' of you, Stockett. Put down that long-ranger an' we'll go into the cabin, open a keg, an' have a business pow-wow."

Patently Old Hyde meant it. He was not just talking in an effort to make Grat drop his guard. Hyde got his answer, straight from the shoulder.

"I can talk better to you over these rifle-sights, salty feller—an' I won't join your gang!" said Stockett. "I aim to entertain you at the Crossin', in the name o' the law."

In an instant Old Hyde's face flamed, and so hotly it was a wonder his whiskers didn't curl up in smoke. "You double-damned fool, we'll rub you out! We're 'leven to one, an' I could see your finish if I was plumb blind, Mister Nerve Strutter!"

The strained situation was nearing a climax, Grat saw. To face the eleven rustlers in the open would be the height of foolhardiness, and he desired to live to recount the tale of this meeting. The cattle bandits were keyed up to such a pitch of avidness to do violence that even the drop he held on Old Hyde would not, he keenly divined, restrain them from slamming their guns in a moment more.

Even Hyde, his rage rioting at white heat, showed signs of ignoring Stockett's lethally pointed rifle and making a two-gun "try." Grat wanted a fighting chance, since an even one was denied him. Still covering Hyde, he heel-tracked doorward.

Craftily watching him, his hairy lips puffing with the consuming fury to which he had ever been an easy victim, Old Hyde reached that point where death had no terrors for him, and he yanked both guns. Never but this once had the old waddie pulled those Colts and not shrouded them almost simultaneously in smoke. Undis-

charged they swayed from his enfeebled grip and he followed them groundward as the Winchester puffed a white cloud from its muzzle, noisily. Old Hyde was dead from that most common of fatal diseases on the frontier—lead poisoning!

With the roars of Hyde's men beating upon his ears like a vengeful surf, Grat heeled backward into the long shack. A slam and a creak of sliding iron and the rustlers confronted a practically impregnable fort, of their own making and constructed for their own use. How Fate laughs!

"Now, you scum o' bums, lean into that rub-out that Old Hairy Hide was blowin' of with his throat-whistler!" yelled Grat Stockett through a loop-hole.

All the cattle thieves but one had dismounted at the fall of their desert crusty leader and skirmished forward. The man who was the exception was lowering himself from the leather just as Stockett blared his defi, and, being a gunman of no little rep, well-earned, the cow-waddie heaved his Colt-iron across the saddle, resting his hand thereon, and fired directly through that loop-hole which had given voice. Ensued the sound of a heavy fall inside the shack.

"Sugar shootin', Mell!" shouted one rustler, savagely delighted. "He's creased or killed! But there ain't no rammin' will get us inside. That door'll hold against anything but dynamite an' the fightin' fool has even barred the winder."

"What's wrong with tryin' the chimbley?" said Mell, gliding forward. "Let Tom snag his rope on it, an' I'll go up the rope; I'm the lightest weight, I reckon."

While the rustler named Tom was trying his hand at a bit of ropework which somewhat taxed his expertness, Mell took occasion, standing where he couldn't be shot at from a loop-hole, to inquire loudly after Clem Hickson's health, for, although Grat hadn't said he was a prisoner in the cabin, Clem's mates didn't doubt that such was the case.

Clem made no reply, though he heard Mell plainly; and the reason he was tight-lipped was not that he wore a gag. When Mell's bullet crashed unexpectedly through the loop-hole, Grat Stockett came very near to death. The lead glanced across his forehead, ripping a furrow and partially stunning him; the voice of Mell yelling to Hickson penetrated Grat's mental haze and he swayed up to a sitting posture, facing Clem. Enough light filtered in between chinks in the logs and warped gaps in the door-boards for the men to see each other dimly in the otherwise dark shack. As he heaved from his prostrate position on the floor, Grat hooked up the Winchester which had fallen beside him, lining Clem Hickson.

"Sure as you answer that guy I'll drill you!" promised Grat, who wanted no one outside to know of conditions inside. Judging aright from the hissed threat that Stockett would carry it out, Hickson held stony silence.

When Grat detected light scrambling sounds on the roof, he knew in what way the rustlers meant to get at him—if they could. He got to his feet and moved dizzily toward the rude, stone fireplace; then abruptly wheeled aside for the captive's corner. He'd better muzzle Hickson first. He dropped to his knees beside the man, reaching for the bandanna in his hip pocket with which to fasten a gag. Because of his condition, Grat didn't notice that his box of matches came forth with the handkerchief, dropping on the floor near Clem's bound feet. Clem himself didn't observe the box until afterward.

With Hickson effectively jaw-hitched, so that any talking he essayed was mumbled, Grat crossed over to the fireplace. He had been careful to make no sound which would indicate he was still alive. He could hear the men outside speculating on whether or not Mell's shot had put an end to him. If they thought him slain, they were more likely to expose themselves to his fire. He needed some "breaks" to win, considering the odds and the die-hard type of men he was fighting.

Grat had tied his neckerchief around his head to retard the flow of blood from his wound, if possible; but even yet trickles invaded his eyes and he had to slat them free of life fluid two or three times while he crouched waiting for Mell, listen-

ing to the rustler scramble around in the chimney. Of a sudden, down shot the body of the lithe rustler, his booted and spurred feet landing amidst the débris of dead fires and scattering it out upon the floor.

Grat was waiting like a tiger in the deepest shadow at the right-hand side, and as Mell stooped to clear the upper part of the fireplace and took two steps into the room, the cowboy gambler straightened, hitting out for the man's head with a Colt barrel. He wanted to "fix" Mell silently, so that the rest of the gang would be puzzled and perhaps investigate by the same route.

But on account of the semi-darkness and his own unsteadiness, Grat fouled the blow a bit. It landed glancingly; also, the waddie's hat helped to break the force of it. Mell staggered sidewise, jerked around with pistol in hand. Two guns banged ear-splittingly—Grat's was the other one! Mell crashed down, to the accompanying jingle of spurs and the thump of his falling gun.

"Thanks, ma'am," muttered Grat, addressing invisible but surely present Lady Luck. "A miss is always a mile wide, if that one did burn my ear!"

"Mell! Oh, Mell! Who got it?" someone beyond the cabin walls bellowed.

"Mell got it, center!" Grat yelled back. He didn't believe they'd try the chimney route again. He was rather sorry, as it gave him an advantage not to be despised. Mell had his nerve with him, coming down alone!

Profane abuse dinned in the besieged man's ears. He loped to a loop-hole, peered out, and observing two or three of the rustlers grouped where they thought he couldn't shoot, poked Colt in the hole and let flicker. More yelling and curses. They were like Indians with their infernal whooping. Whether he "got" anybody Grat didn't know, but it seemed he must have at least inflicted a wound on one of the group. When he stuck his eye at the "loop" again, they had trailed spurs beyond his range of vision—and also gun-range.

He wondered why they didn't set the shack on fire; smoking out quarry, animal or human, seldom, if ever, failed. The reason—which he did not guess—was that the rustlers fully expected to compass his death in some other fashion and thought to have need of this shack in the future. They never dreamed this was the beginning of the end for them, that end accomplished by a lone, wildcat fighter.

There was a brief lull; then "doin's" again, as Grat might have expressed it. The rustlers knew the strength of that cabin door, for all of them there had a hand in building the shack; but on the chance that it could be broken down, they assaulted it with a pole hammered out of one of the corral fences.

In their eagerness to get at the killer of Old Hyde and Mell, they overlooked the thinness of the door planks compared to the walls in which it was hung; that a .45 bullet could crash through it. From certain of the loop-holes, Grat probably could have worked some havoc among the pole-chargers, but he elected to fire directly through the door itself, standing a few paces back and unlimbering with either hand synchronously.

There was a hasty retreat by the men with the corral-pole before those guns had streamed their last bullets through the portal planks. Two of their number stayed behind; the man in the shack had two more notches to his credit, if he was collecting them. But it happened that Grat was not. He had never posed as a gunfighter, though few professionals could equal him at swift Coltwork.

Deviltry had been afoot while Grat was occupied in putting the "deadwood" on the would-be door-busters. Sheriff Hickson, desiring the demise of Mr. Stockett even if he had to put himself in dire peril to bring it about, had discovered that matchbox dropped by the cowboy gambler when he gagged Clem. And Clem had managed to hitch himself round on the floor until his hands, tied behind his back, closed on that box.

It would be a master stroke, thought Hickson, if he could drive Grat out into the arms—the gun-arms—of the bunch by fire. Clem had no notion that Stockett might survive an open clash with the crowd. The sheriff considered he was

"gambling" on a sure thing; the boys would rescue him ere the flames spread too far.

He contrived to open the match-box, strike several matches alight and flip them toward a pile of oily rags, used for cleaning guns. These cloths lay nearly floor-flush against the bottom log of the rear wall. The first two or three matches went out before they struck Hickson's target; he had swung around so that he sat with his back toward the rag pile.

Every time he struck a match, he'd drop the box and pitch his arms as high as the unnatural position of them would allow, shooting the little fire-tipped sticks with uncanny accuracy. Then he'd glance over his shoulder. On about the fourth or fifth trial, he had the satisfaction of seeing that one match had kept its flame alive in the short flight; the oily rags blazed up. Hickson made certain that his incendiary work was well done, then glanced at Grat, that moment a very indistinct figure wreathed in smoke, and flopped on his side and rolled, to get as far from the fire area as possible.

Because of the powder fumes in the cabin and the silence of the fire up to a certain point in its growth, also his interest in what was occurring outside rather than inside, Grat did not become aware of this new peril until the flames had progressed beyond his ability to combat them.

"You lousy pole-pusser!" he yelped at the sheriff. "How'd you do that?" For there could be no doubt that Hickson was the responsible party.

"You gimme the matches to play with your own self!" came the sheriff's spiteful answer, so muffled as to be barely intelligible; he took an abysmal sort of delight in watching the futile efforts of Grat to stamp and beat down the insidious demon of destruction.

Water would have extinguished it, but there was only a very little in the cabin—some in a kettle on the stove, left over from making coffee earlier in the morning. This, hurled on the conflagration, only made it hiss as if in angry defiance of the desperate Stockett. Clem Hickson shook with devilish glee and cloth-strained the remark that the time was near when Grat would be driven to face his mates in the open. "They're shore waitin' for you to sink your carcass with lead!"

"Reckon I'll start now, an' you can stay here an' burn with the rest o' the trash!" Grat turned fiercely on Hickson, throwing the empty kettle on the floor. But he proved by his actions later that he didn't quite mean what he said.

Swiftly he loaded his six-guns; hesitated a moment, looking at the recumbent form of the sheriff; then slid to the door, softly drawing back the iron bolt. Being still latched, the door remained closed. Those outside could not possibly know it had been unbolted; wouldn't know unless they attempted to open it. Grat didn't believe they would try that soon.

The sheriff thought Stockett was going to dash outside, and therefore was surprised when Grat retreated from the door to the fireplace. He bent his big frame and walked into the ash-heap, all but his legs out of Clem's sight. Soon even the legs disappeared; the cowboy gambler was leaving the shack by the way Mell had entered it!

Grat was a big man, much larger than Mell, but the rude chimney was spacious, with many niches between the stones of which it was built. A man might utilize these as hand and toe-holds; Mell had done so in laying his downward course to doom. Grat now imitated him, going up, to "hell on the Gila!"

His size really was an advantage, his shoulders being wide enough to press against the sides of the chimney and thus keep him from slipping. The main trouble he experienced was with his guns; swinging at his hips, they caught in the irregularities of the chimney's interior, threatening to retard his progress. He solved the problem of carrying them by shifting one belt, the sheriff's, so that the gun suspended from it hung down in front, the other so that the heavy holster swung behind.

Although Grat was dizzy from loss of blood, and black as a spade card, his big hands at last gripped the edge of the chimneytop, and he drew himself by main

strength out of the hole; got one foot up and then the other. He feared he would be seen as soon as he appeared and draw fire before he was in a position to return it. But wherever the rustlers were at the moment, he evidently was not in line of observation.

Lowering himself to the slightly sloping roof, Grat rested a moment and readjusted his headbandage and his belts, before executing a snake-crawl toward the eaves. He noticed the lariat by which Mell had ascended still looping the chimney's square bulk. Finally he moved, drawing both six-guns as he neared the eaves of the house. Just then someone cried out below him:

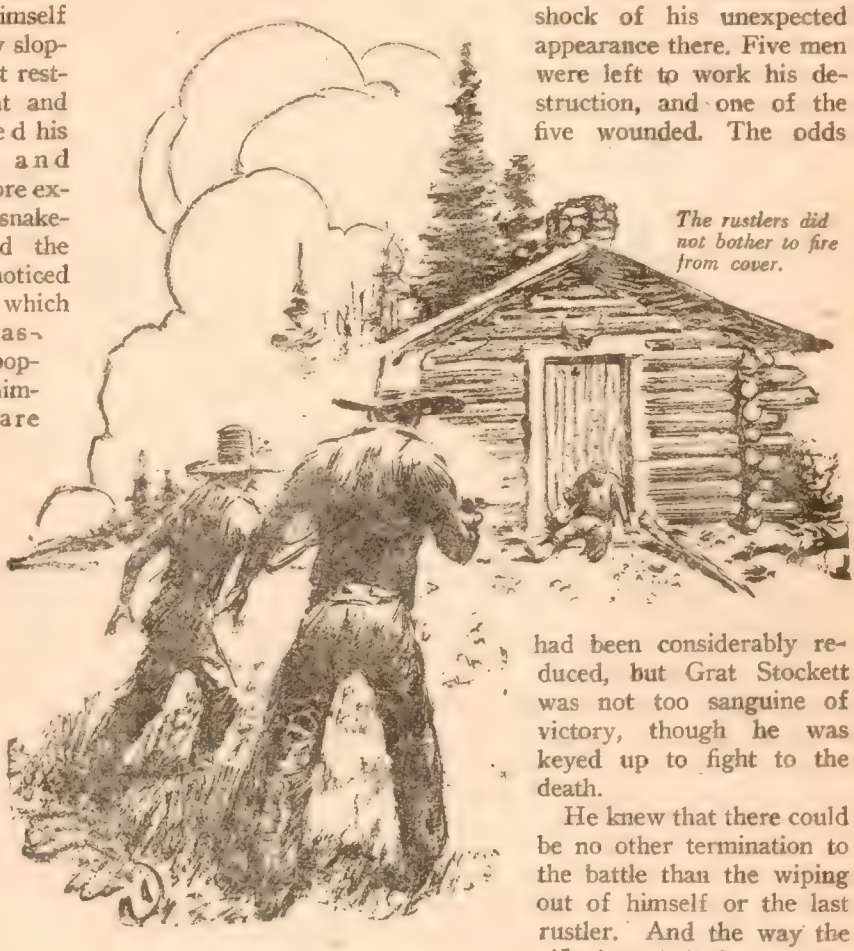
"Cabin's afire, by God! Smell the smoke, boys?"

Grat smelled it, too. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw thick clouds arising from the opposite side of the roof. He edged a little closer to the eaves, until he could look almost directly below him. His remaining enemies were there, all right, far enough away or at angles guaranteed to cheat loop-hole shooting, but rooted to the spot like panthers visioning a kill. Grat barely had caught sight of them when one rustler chanced to glance roofward and see him, also!

CHAPTER VI

A Bullet for the Baron

THE black-faced hombre atop the cabin cut loose with his artillery and dropped a brace of his enemies before they could recover from the shock of his unexpected appearance there. Five men were left to work his destruction, and one of the five wounded. The odds had been considerably reduced, but Grat Stockett was not too sanguine of victory, though he was keyed up to fight to the death.



The rustlers did not bother to fire from cover.

He knew that there could be no other termination to the battle than the wiping out of himself or the last rustler. And the way the .45 slugs hailed over him the next instant, slapping into the roof and burrowing in his anatomy, no sane gambler would have bet heavily on his chances of being a winner.

He stifled a groan. Two bullets had lodged in his right leg, above and below the knee; another had hit his shoulder, but gone on after gouging the flesh. The pain caused his mind to reel, and for a moment things jigged before his eyes, complete darkness threatening.

His convulsive jerks as the lead drilled

into him threw the cowboy gambler nearer to the edge of the roof than was safe; before he knew it, he was rolling off, pitching through the air. The drop was not a long one; but heavy as he was, and not complete master of his bodily actions, the landing on the unyielding ground shook him violently. Pain wrenched a cry from him; no torture-trained Indian could have kept his lips shut under similar conditions. But Lady Luck hovered near; he retained his grip of the Colts.

Fallen almost directly in front of the cabin door, Grat reared his body from the waist, the lead-heavy right leg and the uninjured left one stretched out before him. His enemies could not get at him from the rear, at least. Inside the shack, Sheriff Hickson was frantically fighting his bonds, which seemed to tighten rather than loosen with his desperate efforts, and uttering muffled cries of appeal which no one heard. The inside of the cabin was being rapidly transformed into a semblance of hell's busiest corner. The indications were that Clem had "cooked his hump."

The rustlers did not bother to fire from cover; indeed, they walked into the spatting guns of the man on the ground, deeming that he could not live through the drilling of five guns. But Grat was busy himself, shooting as he had never done before. His vision clearing, he could pick victims with the old accuracy; fire leaped from each of his lifted hands.

A cattle thief who fanned his gun as he advanced, stopped abruptly, coughed out a crimson mouthful and sank. Another lurched in his long stride, fell against a comrade, who shoved him off, and next moment was spitting his bloody curses in the dust. He tried to reach the gun he had let fall when his left lung was ruined; but his creeping fingers were inches from the weapon when all movement ceased.

Spurt upon spurt of smoky flame from both sides, death in the saddle and galloping hard! Stock-still a third cowwaddie halted, holding his gun foolishly up to glazing eyes. He did not see the weapon; he did not know it, when, as a drunken man falls unresistingly, he nosed the sod. Two more—they might have tucked tail, but would not. The fear of death was not in them.

Grat, leaded twice in the torso, hoped only that his head and arms should escape damage until the last shots in his Colts had rolled forth. It was a time when instinct more than the mind governed actions. At his back the cabin wall was scarred and ripped to whiteness in places where the bullets that missed him had struck. His eyes watering from the stinging smoke which enwrapped his head, Stockett drew simultaneous bead upon the two forms indistinctly crowding him through the bank of vapor created by their own gunfire; but a few feet separated them.

To him they seemed stalking wolves. His trigger-fingers crooked; one was sinking, but throwing lead as he fell. The other—yes, sinking, too, his gun silenced. Then a long and well-nigh complete silence descended on the battle-ground; what rendered it incomplete was the roaring of the fire in the cabin. Smoke was puffing from the eaves all around; the chink-holes were emitting it.

Grat had fallen on his side with the downing of the last man. Now, his face twisted with pain, he raised himself on one elbow, glanced at the empty guns which had served him faithfully, then turned blurred gaze upon the still forms fronting him. A gargoyle sort of smile flitted over his features.

"Got 'em—all," he muttered, deep in his throat. "But," as pain wracked him, "seems like they got me, too. Mebbe not . . . dunno. . . ."

Again he lay down, and became as lifeless, apparently, as the men around him. He roused at a piercing yell. (Hickson had managed to partly slip his gag and the terrible danger he was in wrung the cry of a lost soul from him. He had rolled until he was not far from the door.)

"What the hell was that!" muttered Grat, like a man awakened from deep stupor. "Uh, yeh," as the yelling continued. "Hickson—all ready to be roasted, I reckon."

He noticed how the smoke from the burning logs was thickening the air all about him; the roar of the flames was like the baying of some hell-hound. Game as the gamest, with thought for even an enemy, which stamped him as genuinely courageous, Grat swung himself over on his knees after two heart-breaking failures; and making a sort of three-cornered crawl of it, dragging his right leg, gained the nearby door.

He reached up, lifting the latch, pushed the door inward. The out-gushing smoke baffled him for a moment; but guided by the howls of Hickson, he persevered and hitched his crippled body far enough inside to get his hand on the bound man. The few yards it was necessary to pull Hickson to get him beyond reach of the flames tortured Grat exquisitely and exhausted him so that he was close to the fainting point.

But teeth locked, he accomplished it, then stretched beside the bound man. He did not lie long thus; the pain of his wounds was too severe. As he lifted himself on his hands, Hickson was staring at him, with an enigmatical expression on his smoked features.

"You killed 'em all, single-handed. I never knowed such a fighter!" avowed Clem. He had viewed the evidences of Grat's gun-prowess as well as he was able, lying down. "Did you unbar that door 'fore goin' up the chimney so's you could get me out afterward, Stockett?"

"Yes," admitted Grat, speaking with difficulty.

The gaze of one held the gaze of the other as if they never intended to separate. The cabin roared on to complete destruction, unnoticed, banners of smoke sweeping over the men, quick and dead, in the clearing.

"I tried my damnedest to kill you, Stockett. Yet you saved me from the fire I started myself," said Hickson. "Saved me, crippled as you are an' when most enemies would've left me to burn up. I'm a bad hombre, but I ain't tee-total ungrateful. My word ain't been worth a plugged peso in the past, but I shore mean it now when I say that I'll do whatever I can for you if you'll take these ropes off'n me. I ain't no surgeon, but I reckon that's what you need, if you're ever to set saddle again. There's a handy doc at the Crossin'. Mebbe you've met him—old Sawyer."

"I can't fork a hoss——" began Stockett.

"I know it; but there's an old trail-wagon the boys used, down the haw back o' this shack. You likely didn't see it last night. I'll hitch up an' drive you, quick as a team can make it——"

Before Hickson had completed the sentence, Grat interrupted, telling him to roll over the other way, so that he could the more easily get at Clem's bound hands.

Stockett and Hickson heard shooting as the latter piloted the wagon-team at a gallop over the last half mile to Gila Crossing. Rifles and six-guns both were engaged.

"I'd make a li'l bet," remarked Grat Stockett, lying on some blankets in the wagon-bottom, "that Colonel Lightner is tryin' to take the bank an' losin' out."

"I won't gainsay you're likely right he's tryin' to loot 'er, that havin' been his plan for some while past," retorted the driver, his eye strictly on the road to avoid an upset in one of the gullies gouging it. "But how come you think he's losing out? Besides workin' with Old Hyde's rustlers, the colonel has a hard gang o' cowboys."

Grat told him "how come." Bob Red Dog doubtless had succeeded in winning to his support half, or more than half, of the Crossing inhabitants and all the straight ranchers of the Basin (if they had happened into town the day before), when he revealed to his neighbors and brother cattlemen the final stroke planned by "Baron" Clint Lightner.

Hickson was forced to admit Stockett would probably win that bet he had spoken of. The sheriff was in a quandary. He would not turn traitor to his pals in crime as he had turned traitor to the law, and had about decided to join the Lightner forces as soon as Grat was

delivered at the doctor's door, when the team tore into Main Street.

Stockett raised himself on the jolting wagon-bottom to peer over the sea in the direction of the little adobe bank. Fighting men, some ahorse, some afoot, were scattered in front of it. How the fight was going on could not be guessed at this distance, of course; but wounded though he was, the cowboy gambler reached down to the loaded gun in the single belt he now wore and itched to participate in that scrimmage. One would have thought he had had more than enough fighting for one day!

"Drive me into Colt-range o' the bank. Then you quit an' go over to the other side if you want, Hickson," said Stockett. "You'd rather die a outlaw, I reckon; but I promise to give you your chance to reach Lightnin'. Then we're squared doin' each other favors——"

The crack of a rifle. Someone had fired from a store and the sheriff pitched forward, falling off the seat into the street. Grat thought he was in for a runaway ride and was trying to drag himself over the box, when two or three citizens dashed across the board sidewalk, through the sand, and headed the horses. As the animals were brought to a standstill, one of the citizens, a frequenter of The Full Blast, drew a bead on the man's head raised above the wagon-seat. Then, seeing who it was, he lowered the Winchester.

"Welcome to our shootin' city, Brother Stockett. We're some o' Red Dog's little army that he gathered to stop Lightner from robbin' the bank. Bob told us the sheriff was one o' the crooks, so I reckoned I'd just settle his case before he had a chance to do anything when I seen him up on that seat. Thought mebbe he was bringin' reinforcements. Bob said you was huntin' rustlers. Catch any?"

"You bet; I'm all shot up, too. Say, there comes Lightner, alone. Where's he headin'?"

Grat eagerly followed the course taken by a horseman who had broken away from the mill of battling men by the bank. And when he saw that well-known figure drawn rein by the hitch-rack of The Full Blast, Grat spoke hurriedly:

"Looks to me like the fight is goin' against Lightnin' an' he's trackin' for other parts, pardless. Reckon I know what he might be after in The Blast. You savvy I had that li'l bet up with him. One o' you boys do me the favor to take these reins. . . ."

A moment later the wagon was approaching the honkatonk. A few yards from the door Grat cautioned the man driving to stop it. Then he requested that he be lifted out. His arms across the shoulders of a man on either side of him, his right leg dragging uselessly, his chest burning fiercely with the pain of lead lodged there, bloody-bandaged head on fire, Grat advanced with dogged determination to the entrance of The Full Blast. No sound came from within. Everybody had gone to the fight, to take part in it or to watch. Colonel Lightner, wherever he was, had certainly put on the soft pedal.

Though the helpful citizens wanted to stay by him, Grat insisted, "He's my meat—mine to chow alone! I can make it somehow. While I'm in here, one o' you get that doc. Although," he smiled, "I might need the undertaker, instead, when this is over."

He hitched gamely along the floor from the doorsill to the bar; and sweating from every pore, hauled himself upright on his one good leg, hands gripping the edge of the bar. He heard a noise over in a far corner of that room where the safe stood. He nodded, that grim smile again curving his lips. He had been right about the baron's errand here!

Left hand resting on the polished top of the bar, right hand on his Colt-grip, Grat hopped one-legged toward the further end of the mahogany counter. Colonel Lightner heard him, of course, and uprose from his squatting posture before the safe. Despite the soot which masked the features of Mr. Stockett, the crooked cattle baron instantly recognized him. The military figure straightened. Grat faced him full, relying on the support of his left elbow.

"You're a hard loser, Lightnin'," quoth Grat, the first to speak. "I win the reward an' the bet money, yet I find you here tryin' to collect it. Figgered it better than nothin', eh? Bob Red Dog cuttin' you off at the bank, like he must've?"

"I didn't think you could do it when I challenged you that night in here, Stockett. You knew I was throwing down the gauntlet to *you,* didn't you?" Though the baron's body was tensed like a tiger's waiting to spring, he spoke in a conversational tone.

"Sure I was wise, Lightnin'. An' I've cleaned up the Pinto Hills crowd — just back from that job an' lookit me. An' Hickson was shot outside a minute——"

The baron broke in, his voice changed. It rasped, was deadly, matching his attitude. "Before I kill you, Stockett, what's the combination of this safe?"

"Be killed if I tell an' killed if I don't, huh? No good, Lightnin'. Trigger quick an' first——" Grat abruptly launched into the first part of the code and jerked his gun as he recited it; for the colonel's hand had darted beltward.

Smoke curled upward from two gun-muzzles. The cattle baron's Colt was lying on the floor, just as Clint Lightner himself was lying there, the back of his head toward the ceiling of the honkatonk. He and Old Hyde had died of the same disease. Grat's pistol was clutched in his hand, which crossed his lap as he sat on the floor, back supported by the bar-front. His head was sunk on his breast, but he raised it as old Red Dog slammed into the honkatonk announcing victory. Just ahead of Bob ran the doctor whose skill was tested to the utmost to pull through the patient he was then approaching.

"He never touched me—I just give out plumb!" Grat answered Red Dog, down on his heels beside the cowboy gambler and gently removing the Colt from the stiff-clasped fingers. "The code, Red Dog, is: Trigger quick an' first an'—an' stand up for the women. I've done both, ain't I?" He spoke drowsily, but there was a smile on his lips.

"Shore, shore." Red Dog was rather distractedly smoothing Grat's big gun hand and watching the face of the doctor as he made his examination. Quite a group had formed in the honkatonk by the time the physician and surgeon spoke.

"Stockett, I'd say you'll pull through. Take time and care, and right now I'll have to prospect you for that lead. . . ."

"Sure, doc, I'll get well; I was born to be hung," smiled Grat. "But before you tote me outta here to begin said prospectin', I want a private word with Red Dog."

All but the aged cowboy stepped back from ear-range, and Grat whispered: "Fetch Dolly to the doc's. Red Dog, I *know* I been a bachelor long enough. That girl loves me an' I reckon I could learn to love her a heap. She'd never backslide——"

"Hell, no! Heart o' gold. I'll fetch her."

In a week Grat Stockett, with his wife-to-be nursing him night and day, was on the road to recovery; and talking about returning to the range instead of the faro bank.

(*Did you like this novel? See Page* 168.)

HOW IT WAS DONE

THIS is a copy of one of the original posters which to-day is found on the wall of the First National Bank of Santa Fe, N. M.:

NOTICE

To Thieves, Thugs, Fakirs
and Bunco Steerers,
Among Whom Are

J. J. Harlin, alias "Off Wheeller," Sawdust Charlie, Wm. Hedges, Billy the Kid, Billy Mullin, Little Jack, The Cuter, Pock Marked Kid and about 20 others:

If found within the limits of this city after 10 p. m. this night, you will be invited to attend a grand necktie party.

The expense of which will be borne by
100 Substantial Citizens.

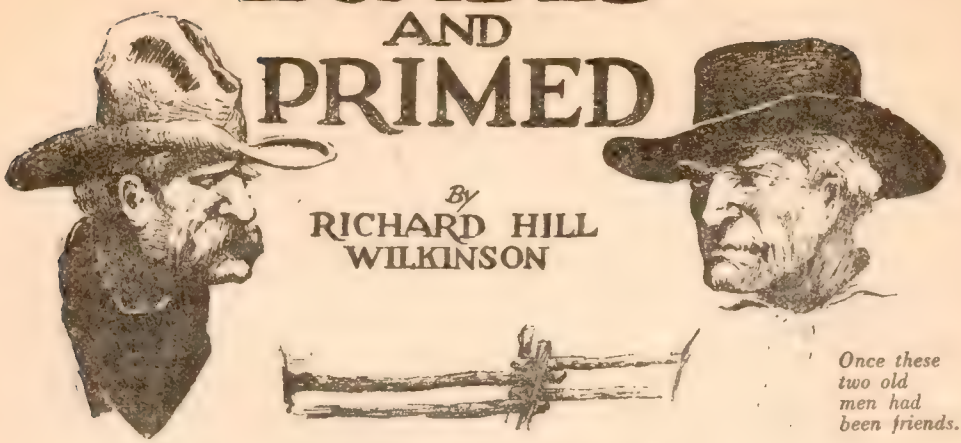
Las Vegas, March 24th, 1882.

This poster was born of the fact that the gang above mentioned had been running things with a high hand in Las Vegas for some time. When the point of endurance was past, the vigilance committee got busy.

The notification was heeded. Billy the Kid and all the rest of the gang were out of town before the zero hour.

LOADED AND PRIMED

By RICHARD HILL WILKINSON



Once these two old men had been friends.

Illustrated by NICK EGGENHOFER

It took a real fight to settle the trouble between two old-time gunfighters.

IT was with expressions of obvious distaste that the group of Circle Cross punchers, lounging before the mess house, eyed the horseman who had just entered the ranch yard and was dismounting ten yards away. The newcomer, a large man with iron grey hair and shaggy eyebrows to match, trailed his reins and strode toward the punchers.

"Any you birds seen old Sumner?" he asked with an attempt at friendliness.

A curly haired youth, Billy Higgins by name, answered: "Now wouldn't that jar yuh! Here's this hombre askin' us ef we ever seen Sumner Robbins, the man we work fer. Ain't thet the damndest yuh ever heard! 'Course we seen him, mister. Seen him 'bout a week ago; seen him yesterday; seen him this mawnin'; seen——"

"Smart, ain't yuh, youngster. You know damned well I aim to hold palaver with Robbins an' I'm askin' where I can find him."

Higgins' face took on a hurt look. "What!" he ejaculated. "*You,* a sheepman, want to hold palaver with a good, self-respectin' cattleman! Kinda insultin' ain't yuh, mister?" And amid the chuckles of his companions, the curly haired youth shrugged disdainfully and turned away.

"Talkin' right pert fer a kid that'll soon be outter a job, ain't yuh, son?"

The youth whirled. "Meanin', Tom Riley?"

"Meanin'," replied the older man with a smirk, "meanin', young feller, thet there won't be any room left fer yore boss's cattle afore long an' he'll hafta sell out."

"Yeah?" The words came in a dangerous drawl. "Well, lemme tell yuh, Riley, ef Robbins hasta sell out, it'll be because all his punchers have been shot daid by sheepmen an' he can't get any more." The murmur of approval which arose among the punchers proclaimed the truth of the youth's words.

"Blah! You make me tired with your war talk. You know damn well ef you start to fight, the sheriff an' the state troopers will be down here in no time an' wipe you offin the map."

"Uh-huh. Well, mebbe the state pertects yore right to graze sheep on the open range, mister; an' mebbe it don't allow no open warfare. But by jinks it don't stop no two law-abidin' citizens to settle a little disagreement among themselves with six-guns. No, sir."

Higgins' face was white and drawn; his

eyes flashed with the hatred that he felt toward the other man. There was a breathless pause while the punchers awaited developments.

"An' jest what d'yuh mean by that, son?" Cool confidence was written in the sheepman's voice.

"I mean that yore a low-down, stinkin' pole cat, Tom Riley. Yo're grazin' yore sheep on our range jest outter meanness. There's acres an' acres o' land t' the north where you can establish yore camps an' where you'll be outter the way o' cattlemen who fought an' made this country what it is by blood an' sweat. You know damn well that yore filthy sheep polute the water an' grass wherever they're located but yuh graze 'em down here jest outter meanness. Sheep are low, stinkin', miserable things an' I gotta idee the men as owns 'em is almost as bad."

Billy Higgins knew that his chances were slim against the sheepman and one-time gun-fighter. But the hatred which surged through him ruled his head. He stood there in a half-crouched fashion. His right hand hung stiff and rigid above the forty-five at his hip. His whole attitude uttered the challenge that his lips had all but spoken.

"That calls fer a showdown, son. An' I'm sayin' right now thet I'm sorry. I ain't used t' fightin' kids, but any man as calls me names has gotta back up his words."

There was a hasty movement behind the youth. Those cowpunchers who considered themselves anywhere within range of a stray bullet, scrambled to a point of safety.

Bud Webster, Higgins' chum and partner, remained nearest to the scene of battle. Bud's ungloved hand hovered above his forty-five. He knew that his hot-headed friend was a fool. But he knew also that if Riley beat Higgins to the draw, the sheep-owner would have to beat Bud too.

But Bud Webster didn't have to prove his loyalty to his friend. He was spared the trouble. There came an interruption in the drama that was being acted out there in the ranch yard. An interruption of startling nature.

From behind the sheep-owner and to the right, there came a sudden, curt command.

"Quit it. First one as goes fer his guns gets plugged!"

Billy Higgins' gaze shot past his opponent and rested upon the figure of a man standing ten feet away with a pair of leveled six-guns in his hands. Billy knew that Sumner Robbins meant business.

For a moment the two contestants hesitated. Riley, half turned in his tracks, stared at the walruslike face of the old cattle owner with a half smile.

"Take out yore gats an' throw 'em on the ground, butts first. That goes fer you too, Higgins, an' make it snappy."

There was no mistaking the tones. There was a warning in the words that could not pass unheeded. Riley shrugged and without a word cast his forty-five at the rancher's feet. Higgins' gun followed, though in a more reluctant manner.

The punchers, grouped to one side, breathed a sigh of relief. A crisis had been passed, a crisis that might have resulted in a private war. For the most part they were glad.

"You fellers get into the mess house," Robbins snapped. "Reckon Yong will have chow ready pronto. Me, I'll tend t' this visitor—without help."

Grumbling, the punchers obeyed. They would liked to have remained to learn the nature of Riley's visit. Something unusual had happened, which had brought him to the home of his enemy. Higgins and Webster might have been able to enlighten their comrades had they chosen.

"Well?" Robbins questioned without cordiality when the last puncher had disappeared.

"Well, Robbins, yuh shore saved a hot-headed young fool from hell."

"Nemmine that, Riley. What are yuh doin' on my ranch?" And then he added with sarcasm: "Yuh shore didn't come t' pay me a friendly visit."

Riley's lips twisted into a sneer. "Yo're

damn' right I didn't, Robbins. I come t' tell yuh thet some o' yore damn fool punchers been hazin' my sheep off the open range again. This is the last time I'm a-gonna warn yuh. Once more an' there'll be trouble."

"Yeah? An' what makes yuh think they was my punchers? Can yuh prove it? Why in hell don't yuh keep yore stinkin' sheep away from here? Why don't yuh drive 'em north where there's plenty o' room 'stead o' polutin' my range land an' water? Why don't yuh, huh? It's jest because yore so damn mean, that's why. Yuh know yuh got rights t' the open range same as me. But instead o' bein' decent about it an' grazin' yore sheep where there ain't any cattle, yuh stick right around here. Damn it, Riley, yuh ain't shootin' square!"

Once these two old men had been friends, partners. Together they had joined forces with a sheriff who was bent on ridding the country of outlaw bands, and had figured strongly in the final showdown when the posse had discovered the bandits' rendezvous and abolished them forever.

That was years ago. When law and order had at length come to the land to stay, both of the old gun-fighters had turned to other means for a livelihood. For Robbins it had been cattle. Riley had forseen a fortune in wool and mutton, and had invested his money in sheep.

The result had been inevitable. Never did cattlemen and sheepmen agree. They were natural enemies. And so it was with the one-time partners. They had come to words when Riley had first grazed his sheep on the open range near Robbins' ranch. A fight followed, a fight of words and curses. In the end, Riley had sworn to drive Robbins from the range. And Robbins had vehemently declared that the act would be accomplished only over his dead body.

When Riley made no kind of answer other than a sarcastic grunt, Robbins continued: "I ain't got the time t' keep tabs on my punchers, Riley. I'm losin' cattle a-plenty by rustlers. It keeps me busy watchin' the herds as much as possible. But I am sayin' ef yore damn sheep get a monopoly on all the springs hereabouts an' drive my cattle from the best grazin', I ain't tellin' my punchers not to haze 'em outter the way, not by a long shot.

"If it's fightin' yuh want, you'll get it a-plenty long as yuh keep shovin' yore sheep on my range. If yuh go gettin' the help o' the law, I'll find some other way t' fight yuh. But by God, I'm gonna stand up fer what I fought an' worked fer, don't mistake me."

"Crawlin' eh? Askin' me t' take my sheep an' git outter the way, eh? Well, you can go plumb t' hell, Sumner Robbins. I told yuh onct I was aimin' t' drive yuh from this range an' I ain't takin back my word. I'm a-goin' now an' I'm tellin' yuh onct more, ef I catch many more o' yore punchers a-hazin' my sheep off the open range, it means war, an' I don't aim t' call on no law t' help me, either."

"Keep yore sheep where they belong, Riley, an' you can avoid all this. I ain't cravin' t' fight, but ef I have to, I reckon my eye is as good as ever."

Bud Webster and Billy Higgins circled around a large herd of Circle Cross cattle and headed southward. Both rode with the utmost of caution, keeping themselves well screened from the surrounding range as much as the scant shelter allowed. Across the saddle of each there reposed a high-powered rifle; and a pair of six-guns was slung about each of the youth's hips.

As they rode, they held low-voiced conversation. Higgins was speaking:

"This war between them sheepmen an' us cattlemen," he muttered, "ain't what it's cracked up t' be. 'Specially when the old man told us not to fire on any o' Riley's men onless they shot at us first. Me, I'm all fer shootin' first an' askin' questions afterward. But orders is orders an' ef we aim t' keep on workin' fer Robbins, I reckon we gotta do as he says."

"That's the hell of it," growled Webster in agreement. "Ef we meet up with a sheepman, we gotta wait till he plugs us afore we can use our irons, an' mostly

we won't have a chanct ef we wait thet long. One o' our boys has got drilled already an' is lyin' up in the bunkhouse with a hunk o' lead in his shoulder. Ain't right, nohow."

Higgins suggested: "Ef the sheriff should hear 'bout thet shootin', he'd be down here like all git out. Reckon thet's why the boss don't want us t' shoot first. Ef the sheriff does happen down this way, the boss wants t' be on the right side o' the law. Ef. . . . Huh! Bud, look down there!"

The youth had brought his dun-colored pony to an abrupt halt and was pointing down to a small valley. Through a screen of willows which fringed the summit of the hill where the two punchers sat staring wide-eyed, they made out five men grouped about a small fire close to a small creek.

"Damn me, Billy. D'yuh see what I see?"

"I shore do, Bud, an' it don't surprise me none either. Them fellers is usin' a runnin' iron on our cattle an' two o' 'em is Tom Riley's sheep-herders!"

"We shore got the goods on 'em now, Billy. An' I'm shore glad we happened along this way. Say. . . ." Webster paused and leaned forward in his saddle as if assuring himself of a sudden discovery. "I'll eat my hat ef I don't recognize two more o' them fellers as belongin' t' the Circle Cross! Billy, there's two o' our boys down there helpin' them rustlers!"

The discovery proved only too true. Its nature left the two youthful cowpunchers speechless. For fully a minute they sat their horses, staring down at the group of rustlers, incredulously. To their minds a traitor was the lowest form of humanity.

It was the quick-tempered Higgins who broke the strained silence.

"There's dirty work goin' on down there, Bud. An' Robbins is the loser. I don't care a damn who it is as is doin' the rustlin'; we gotta put a stop to it. We git paid fer takin' care o' Circle Cross cattle, an' I reckon this is part o' our job. Let's go, Bud."

Higgins moved forward, loosening the six-guns in his holsters and taking a firm grip on his rifle. But he was stopped by a word from his companion.

"Don't be a fool, Billy. We wouldn't stand a chanct agin five of 'em. Best thing we kin do is go back an' git help."

"Yeah," Higgins gritted. "An' while we're gone, these fellers'll light out an' there won't be anyone waitin' fer us when we git back. No, sir. I'm a-goin' down there now an' take my chances."

Higgins' ire was aroused. It was a foolhardy piece of business—going down there and attempting to capture five logically desperate rustlers—and none knew it better than Bud Webster. But despite the latter's pleadings, Higgins' mind was made up and with a face that was grim and hard, he began circling toward a growth of aspens that would cover his approach until within fifty yards of the rustlers.

There was nothing Webster could do but follow. Much as he knew the need of adding to their forces, he knew also that if Higgins was left alone, the youth would not hesitate a moment in attempting to capture the rustlers single-handed.

It was not difficult to approach through the aspens unnoticed. The distance to the rustlers was far enough to cover what little sound they made, and the growth was thick enough to obscure their forms. But at the edge of the cleared range land they paused. Even Higgins could see the folly of progressing farther.

"We can't ride right out there in the open," Webster muttered, laying a reassuring hand upon his mount's neck. "We'd git plugged before we made ten feet."

Higgins was silent for a moment, staring out through the aspens at the rustlers. The sight of the thieves at work apparently stirred something to life within him.

"It's the only way we kin git anywhere near 'em," he replied slowly. "If we ride out there a-whoopin' an' a-shootin' like we had a whole army behind our back, it's ten t' one them rustlers'll hit fer cover without delay. We can down at least two of 'em an' bring 'em back to the ranch fer suviniers."

And before Bud Webster could utter a single syllable of protest, the hot-headed young Higgins had let out an ear-splitting yell and, with rifle spitting lead, dashed into the open and headed toward the creek. Only for an instant did Webster hesitate. To him the whole thing was a piece of impulsive folly. He knew that unless fate was unusually kind to them, the results of their move would be disastrous.

But further reasoning with the high-tempered Higgins was now beyond possibility. There was but one thing to do. And Bud Webster did it. Hardly had Higgins cleared the last of the aspens before his companion sunk spurs home, and with grim determination written upon his tanned face, started madly in his wake.

The animal snorted and plunged ahead.

But the thing that Billy Higgins had hoped for did not occur; rather, the dreaded opposite.

Obviously startled at Billy's first, terrible yell, the rustlers leaped to their feet and watched in astonishment as the two young punchers dashed madly from the aspen growth. Taken totally unawares, they did not fully comprehend the meaning of the sudden interruption until Higgins' first shot had kicked up a cloud of dust close to the feet of one.

A foul curse escaped the man's lips. And as another bullet whined perilously close to his ear the rustler reached for his six-gun.

There came a puff of smoke, the sharp bark of the forty-five. Higgins' dun-colored pony went to its knees, struggled erect, then went down and lay gasping.

A groan escaped the lips of Webster. With a savage jerk on the reins, he brought his own mount to a halt within a foot of his partner.

Higgins struggled to his feet, cursing fluently. Facing the rustlers he snatched out his six-gun and pressed the trigger. But the shot took no effect. The rustlers, realizing the danger of standing in the open, had taken any available shelter and were pouring a raking fire at the two punchers.

"Up here, yuh fool!" Webster screamed. "Climb up behind me! It's our only chance!"

As Bud spoke, a leaden pellet tore into his saddle and another lifted his sombrero and carried it to the ground. Bullets

whined and pattered all about them.

Higgins held his position only long enough to empty his forty-five and then, after another mad warning from Webster, leaped up behind the latter's saddle and sought his other weapon.

But Webster did not give Billy the opportunity to bring the gun into play. With a curse he whirled his pony, spurring him cruelly.

The animal snorted and plunged ahead.

Fortunately none of the rustlers' shots did much damage as Bud Webster raced his mount across the open space from whence they had come. But if the two punchers thought they were to get away this easily they were greatly mistaken.

Hardly had they reached the cover of the aspens before sounds of pursuit came from behind. The sound of shod hoofs and continued shooting told plainly that the rustlers were intent on making a capture. They knew that if the young punchers made their escape the news of the rustling would quickly spread. And the results, undoubtedly, would be unfavorable.

Webster followed along the trail by which they had approached, until he came to the foot of the slope. Here he turned sharply to the right, keeping well under cover of the trees and urging his horse to its utmost.

From behind, sounds of pursuit were distinct. The shooting had ceased because no longer could the forms of the punchers be discerned, so thick was the growth. But the cow-thieves had no difficulty in following the trail.

"We'll have to keep to the timber," Higgins shouted in Webster's ear. "If we hit fer the open we're gone sure."

Webster had no reply. His whole attention was absorbed in guiding the pony and assisting the animal in keeping its feet. But the young puncher's mind was fast at work. He knew that Billy spoke the truth. He knew, also, that before long, they'd have to take shelter. They could not hope to outdistance the rustlers with Bud's pony carrying double.

Three minutes later Higgins voiced his partner's thought. "Have tuh hole up afore long," he yelled. "They're gainin' on us every minit. Be shootin' purty soon."

Webster nodded and swerved the pony sharply to the left. Up the side of the slope they went, the horse laboring strenuously, toward a jumble of rocks partly screened by overhanging vines and scrubs.

Bud brought the pony to a halt. "Hafta stop here," he panted. "Pony's 'bout done fer. Mebbe we can hold 'em off a little while."

They swung to the ground. Higgins darted into a small cave made by an overhanging rock. Webster slapped the pony's rump sharply and followed his partner.

Together they rolled several heavy rocks before the mouth of the cave and knelt behind the improvised barricade and waited. Their faces were grim and hard. They knew they were facing death.

"Here they come," Webster muttered, poking his rifle between a crevice in the rocks. "They don't know we've stopped here an' can take 'em by surprise."

A moment later two horsemen broke through the timber and appeared in full view. Instantly from the rock pile two jets of smoke burst forth and two death-messages sped to greet the riders.

A scream of pain was followed by the shriek of a horse. One of the horsemen tumbled to the ground, clutching frantically at his breast. The other leaped from his dying horse and sprang behind a sheltering boulder.

No more horsemen appeared. The drumming of shod hoofs ceased. The remaining rustlers had taken warning from those first two shots and added caution to their approach.

"I got thet feller neither of us recognized," Webster muttered. "The other one, the one whose horse you shot, was a sheepman. Too bad yuh didn't git him 'stead o' the cayuse."

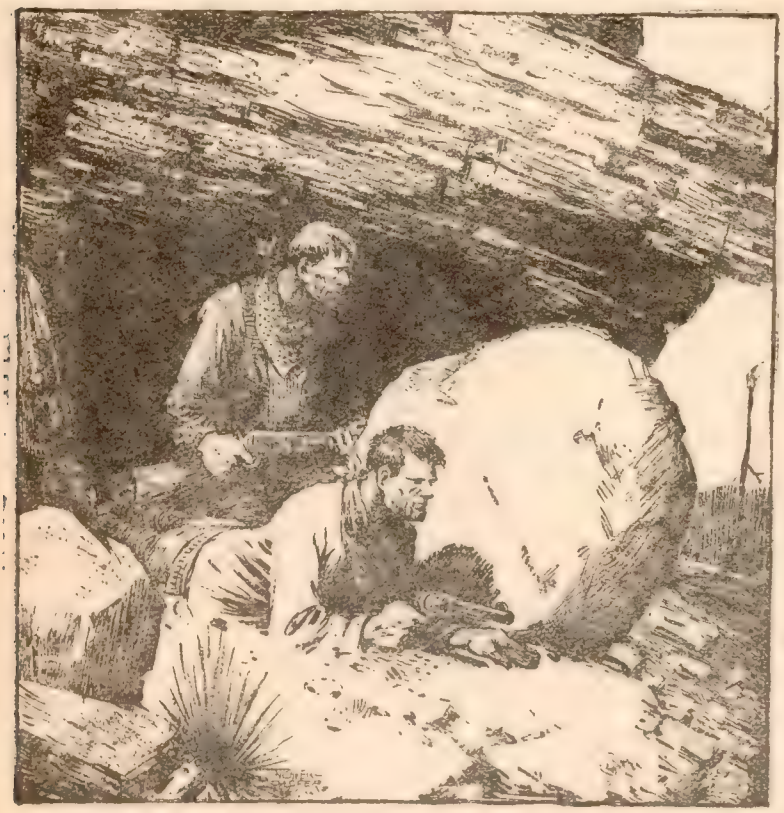
"Wish I had my rifle," Higgins returned. "Lost it back there on the range. These damn six-shooters ain't much good 'less you're right up close."

"They'll be creepin' up on us afore long," Bud warned. "Better keep our eyes open an' shoot ef we see anythin' thet might look like a man. Mebbe ef we can

hold 'em off till night, we kin git outter here."

They lapsed into silence. Each sought a point of vantage behind the fortress, and peered intently down the side of the slope. No further movements or sounds gave evidence that the rustlers were about.

Then suddenly Webster brought his rifle to his shoulder. From the corner of his eye, Higgins could see that his partner was sighting along the barrel.



They knew they were facing death.

The weapon spoke. Once, twice it barked sharply, breaking the stillness. Almost instantly the shots were answered. From points surprisingly near, forming a complete semicircle, spurts of smoke appeared and the crash of rifles bespoke the presence of rustlers.

Bullets thudded and pinged all about. A spray of dirt kicked into the face of Higgins. The youth cursed and dropped from view. Those leaden pellets were coming altogether too close. He'd have to find a new porthole.

Webster also had forsaken his first vigil. He, too, found it necessary to seek a position where his body would be less exposed.

For fully five minutes the bandits kept up a constant barrage. Higgins and Webster returned the shots whenever the chance afforded, but they found it extremely dangerous to expose any part of their anatomy. Those rustlers were certainly out for blood!

"They're coming closer," Higgins muttered. "They're keepin' us down by their steady shootin', an' all the time they're creepin' up on us. They got good cover out there; be able to git up close 'thout us seein' 'em."

"Reckon you're right, Billy. They aim to get as close as possible; then they'll charge. It'll be hand to hand 'fore long."

Higgins' lips were set in a straight line as he peered through a place in the rocks. "If it comes t' that, Bud, we're shore gonna give 'em somethin' t' think about. Mebbe I was a fool fer tryin' thet stunt back there an' I'm sorry I got yuh into this mess."

"Fergit it, Billy. Me an' yuh is pards, an' when one feller gits hisself intuh a mess, it's up t' the other t' help 'im out. Won't no one be able t' say me an' you never died fightin'."

Higgins' hand went out and momentarily rested upon his partner. "I'm a fool, Bud, bnt I'm proud o' claimin' you fer a pal."

Old Sumner Robbins was worried. Early that morning he had sent young Webster and Higgins out to pick up strays on the southern range. The punchers were long since due back at the ranch house. The old man had work laid out for them. The other cowboys were at work to the north of the ranch and would not return before sundown.

"Probably gone an' got themselves intuh some kinda mess," he growled to Yong, the only person left at the ranch. "Ef they're out there fightin' them sheepmen, it'll mean hell to pay. I ain't hankerin' none a-tall t' have the sheriff down on me with all my other trouble, an' as long as Riley leaves me an' my cattle alone, I ain't aimin' t' bother him none a-tall."

The cook gazed at his boss in wordless bewilderment. Small consolation he was.

For another half hour the old man stamped around muttering to himself and cursing everything that came within his range of vision. Then, unable longer to stand the suspense, he buckled on a pair of six-guns, saddled his big grey and headed for the south range.

Despite the fact that one of his punchers had been wounded by a supposed sheepman, Robbins was still reluctant to declare open war upon the mutton-dealers. He had issued orders to his punchers not to shoot at a sheepman unless they were first fired upon. But at present he more than half suspected that those orders had been disobeyed; hence the failure of Webster and Higgins to put in an appearance. It was mid-afternoon when Robbins came upon the spot where his two young punchers had discovered the rustlers at work. For a long time he had combed the south range in a fruitless attempt to locate either Webster or Higgins. But here were telltale signs that might lead to something more.

Without difficulty he surmised what had been going on. The ashes from the fire, several fragments of rope and a neglected running iron told him much. With mounting anger he realized the significance of the evidence laid out. And then suddenly he was struck by a thought. Undoubtedly the signs of hasty departure, which were evident, had something to do with Webster's and Higgins' disappearance.

With consternation, Robbins began a careful search of the immediate vicinity. And it was not long before he came upon the plain trail made by the punchers and the pursuing rustlers.

Robbins sank spurs home, urging his mount along the trail at a rapid gait. A mile farther and he drew rein abruptly. From ahead came the distinct bark of a rifle, followed closely by others and the occasional spitting of a six-shooter.

The old ranch owner frowned and dismounted. Drawing his forty-fives, he moved cautiously ahead. But again his progress was halted. Hardly had he taken ten paces before a man, with drawn weapons, stepped directly in his path.

The surprise was mutual. Both parties stared at the other in utter amazement. It was Robbins who first recovered and spoke.

"Well, Tom Riley, might I ask what you're doin' on my range?"

"I'm lookin' fer a couple o' my herders, seein' yuh wanta know so damn bad. And," he added after a pause, "by the sounds up ahead they're havin' a little trouble."

Robbins' chin shot forward. "*Yore* herders! Huh! Reckon thet clears things up some. Guess it must be my boys as is givin' 'em the trouble. Well, seein' you're here, I suppose we mought as well mosey up thet-a-way an' see what all the shootin's about."

"Suits me, Robbins. But ef yore punchers has kilt any o' my herders, they'll settle with me, you bet."

"An' thet goes fer you too, Riley."

Together the two old gun-fighters and one-time partners moved up the trail, holding their guns in readiness and taking care that their approach was unobserved.

As they advanced the shooting became more distinct and greater in volume. And when they had come to the foot of the slope, at the top of which Webster and Higgins were holding their fortress, Riley took the lead. Dropping to his knees, he crept stealthily ahead. At length he

paused and Robbins came up beside him.

They parted the bushes and peered forth. And the scene which they beheld brought both of them to their feet. Fifty yards away four men had sprung to their feet and were charging a jumble of rocks behind which an occasional jet of smoke bespoke the presence of men.

As the four rustlers plunged headlong at the improvised fort, Webster and Higgins leaped over the top and met them just outside.

Weapons, now empty, were discarded. Fiercely the four rustlers attacked the punchers with their bare hands. Two to one, the advantage was with the majority.

But Webster and Higgins had no intention of giving up without a battle to the finish. Like two young lions they met their opponents. With knotted fists that flayed with every ounce of strength in their young bodies, they struck out at the faces of the rustlers.

For several clock ticks, neither side gained an advantage. Higgins and Webster knew that, for them, it was a matter of life and death, and they fought with all the strength they could muster.

But the inevitable was soon to happen. A rustler moved behind Higgins and attacked from the rear. Another worried him from in front.

Vainly the youth struck out, aiming his blows where he knew they would be the most effective. But even as he would have hurled himself bodily upon the man in front, he was seized from behind and hurled to the ground.

A booted foot flashed past his eyes and struck him fiercely in the head. The world reeled. Consciousness was slowly slipping from his body. A dirty grey obscured his vision. Distantly he heard the hoarse shout of a man coming up the hill. Dimly he made out two huge forms running toward him. Then he slipped into an abyss of blackness.

When Billy Higgins returned to consciousness he heard voices that sounded strangely familiar. Momentarily he was unable to recall what had occurred. Then he remembered with startling suddenness.

Billy turned his head and groaned with the pain. Then his brows knit as he made out two men sitting close by. They were Tom Riley and Sumner Robbins. And from all appearances they were the best of friends.

"Yep," Riley was saying, "I suspected two o' my herders o' doin' thet rustlin' yuh spoke of an' this mornin' I followed 'em out on the range an' found 'em missin'. I was a-lookin' fer 'em when I run acrost yuh."

"Huh! An' all the time they was in cahoots with two o' my boys an' a feller from somewhere outside. I reckon the five of 'em are the ones as has been hazin' off yore sheep an' shootin' at my punchers. We bin suspectin' each other o' double-crossin' the other when all the time it was these skunks as has been causin' the trouble."

There was a moment of silence in which Billy Higgins endeavored to figure out what had happened. Then Riley broke in upon his meditations.

"Them young punchers o' yores was shore puttin' up one game fight, Sumner. It shore was worth seein'. Way thet feller kicked Higgins in the head I thought he was done fer shore. Damn lucky fer 'em me an' yuh happened along with a pair o' six-guns that were loaded and primed fer slaughter."

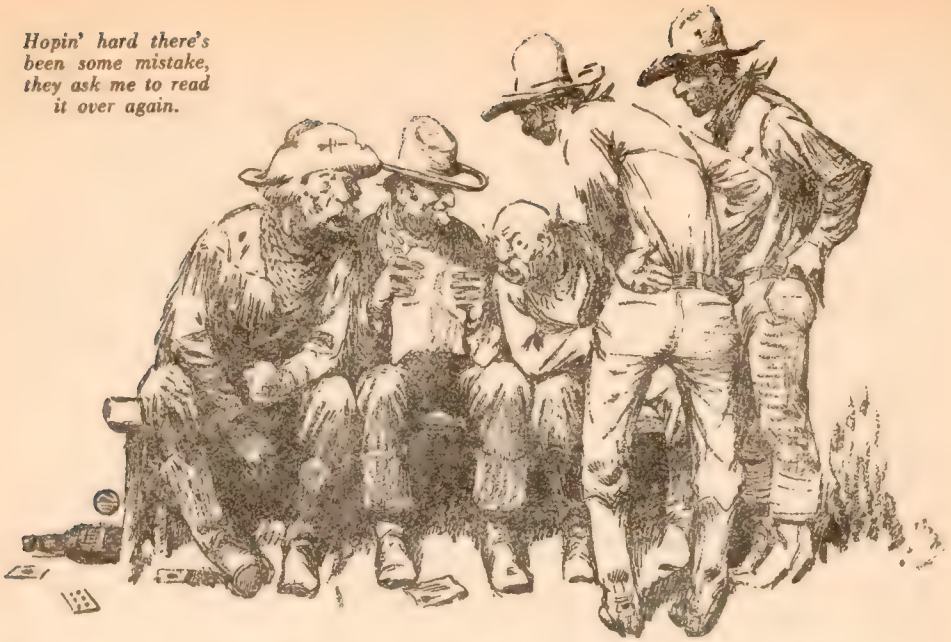
"Reminded me o' the ole days, Tom, when me an' yuh was fightin' side by side. It shore is too bad yuh had t' turn t' sheep fer a livin'."

"There's money in sheep an' I reckon I'll stick to it. However, I ain't felt jest right ever since I made thet threat o' drivin' yuh off this range. I reckon you was right, Sumner, an' I reckon by to-morrer I'll be movin' my flocks t' the northward."

Another silence. Billy Higgins frowned and then grinned as he saw the big hand of his boss steal out and seek that of the sheep-owner.

"An' I reckon, Tom, I'm sorry fer all I said an' done. Ef yuh ever have a hankerin' t' come back down this way, don't fergit there's a welcome a-waitin' fer yuh at the Circle Cross."

(Tell what you think of this story. See Page 168.)



Hopin' hard there's been some mistake, they ask me to read it over again.

THE FENCIN' OF THE WINDOW-SASH

By Scott Hauter

Illustrated by NICK EGGENHOFER

Boothill Boggs and his outfit prove that their range is danged wild and primitive.

BROTHER, when yuh squint real hard at cowpunchin', it boils down t' jest about what was s'posed to of been done away with by Abe Lincoln. Slavery, that's what it is. Take that as gospel from yore Uncle "Boothill" Boggs, which same is the brand I sports on this range. It ain't the actual punchin' of cows that galls up a cowboy; it's this cussed roustabout work.

Dustin' off mean, humped-up broncs each mornin', steppin' right along in a ornary old cow's tracks as she high-dives straight down into a canyon, settin' yore saddle twenty hours at a stretch—they ain't no kicks on *that!* It's these pick-and-shovel jobs what's got to be done on foot what bogs down a cowboy.

Anyway, that's how it strikes us five Window-sash Ranch riders, which five, with yore kind permission, I'll haze out o' the corral. Fust is "Alamo" Massey, the fire-squirtin'est little salamander what ever throwed hot lead at a feller slanderin' Alamo's home state of Texas. Next is "Windy Bill," that blamed brave long-legged ex-Injun scout; his legs got long that way from runnin' from Injuns. Follered next is them two immature, young "Locoed Twins"—Jim and Mike. And lastly, bringin' up the tail, yore Uncle Boothill Boggs.

The outfit we work for is the Window-sash Ranch, and she's one whopper of a chunk of land. Our boss lives back East, which same is old Jake Baum, President of the Window-sash Land & Cattle Co., Capital $500,000.00. And the ideers about cow raisin' which that locoed tenderfoot inflicts on us has got to be seen to be believed.

Take, for instance, the shock that laughin' hyena of a old Jake Baum hands us one day in a letter as folls.:

> "I'm gettin' tired of havin' my cattle stray all over the West from Montana to Arizony and I decided to fence in the ranch. Now, I ain't got no money to throw away on hirin' fence builders, so I decided you boys should build this fence durin' the off-season and when

you have any spare time. I'll ship you the wire and I want you t' git busy right off and start buildin' this fence.

Yores truly,

JAKE BAUM."

I reads that insult to any self-respectin' bunch of punchers out loud to Alamo and Windy Bill and the Jim and Mike Twins. Hopin' hard there's been some mistake, they ask me to read it over again. When I've done that, each of them punchers' faces looks like he jest had four kings beat by four aces.

Windy Bill, that brave old ex-Injun scout, is as pale as if he'd jest saw some Injuns gallopin' for him. Old Alamo Massey looks like he jest heard the Mexican army captured his old state of Texas. The Jim Twin, faced with the prospect of all that work, has keeled over on the floor. The Mike Twin stands petrified, with his mouth wide open.

For a solid half minute no one is able to speak. Then Alamo Massey busts the silence.

"Fence!" he yowells. "Me, thet was raised in Texas wheah yuh could ride a thousand miles in any direction and nevah open a gate—am Ah now ast t' build a bob wiah fence?"

"Fence!" hollers that ex-Injun scout, Windy Bill. "What? Me build fence; me, what fought Injuns with my pals, Buffaler Bill and Major Mudhen, and sim'lar great Injun scrappers?"

"F-f-fence!" stutters the Jim Twin, shudderin' at the thought of all that work. "Old Jake don't mean fence buildin' where you got to cut posts and dig postholes and stretch bob wire, does he?"

"I'm a cowboy, not no farmboy," says the Mike Twin. "If I can't do a job on hossback, I don't do it!"

"It's a insult, there's no doubt to it," I agree.

"'Insult' is puttin' 'er mild, Boothill," states Alamo. "Ah've stood all Ah'm goin' t' stand from thet tenderfoot of a old Jake Baum and his Window-sash Land & Cattle Co. Heah's wheah Ah says 'Adios' t' this job."

"Im ridin' off with you, Alamo," says Windy Bill.

"Me and Jim, likewise," says our Mike.

"Wait, boys," I tells 'em. "Don't be goin' off half-cocked. We been insulted by old Jake Baum with this kind o' labor before and we dodged it somehow. Look at that field of alfalfa he sawed off on us, intendin' t' make this into a hay ranch and us into hay-hands, and remember how we got rid of that alfalfa by a little deeplomacy. Same way with this. There's a hell of a difference between wantin' a fence built and *gittin'* it built!"

"But, muh Gawd, Boothill," argues Windy Bill. "Fencin' this big ranch would take five men forty years. I expect t' die with my boots on, but I don't aim to die with 'em on while stringin' bob wire."

"Yeah, boys," I argues, "but I wouldn't pull back and bust my lead rope over this. Keep cool, play yore cards close t' the table, and stay with the game till yore last chip."

The boys they fin'ly cool down and agree to stick and see how this latest wrinkle irons out.

It's a week or so later the R. R. agent at Coyote Wells notifies us he's got a car of freight for the ranch.

Alamo and me ride over there wonderin' what in Hannah is that car of freight. It turns out to be a car of bob wire fence, shipped us with Jake Baum's compliments.

"Boothill," snorts Alamo, "thet's enough bob wiah t' fence in the hull U. S. A. and have enough left ovah t' make a hoss pasture out o' Texas."

"What are we goin' to do with all that cussed wire?" I ask the R. R. agent.

"I don't care what you do with it, Boothill, jest so you take it out of the car," he tells me. "We're shippin' a lot o' whiskey out West now and we don't want no cars settin' on sidin's with nothin' but bob wire in 'em."

We can't figger out nothin' else to do with that wire except haul it out to the ranch. The Mike and Jim Twins freight bob wire steady for two weeks, unloadin' them spools of wire near the house and goin' back to Coyote Wells for more bob wire and unloadin' it on the pile and goin' for more, until they're dizzy from so many round trips.

It makes a mountain of bob wire at least twenty foot high. The labor of jest figgerin' out all the posts that would have to be cut and all the postholes dug and posts set to string all that pile of bob wire on, plumb exhausts us. And merely inspectin' that Pike's Peak of bob wire wearies us so much, we got to retire to the bunkhouse and recuperate by playin' poker for the rest of the day.

After we git all that bob wire hauled and piled up, we feel we're entitled to a long rest, but they ain't no rest with that slave-driver of a old Jake Baum on the job. He hands us another shock. The dang freight agent at Coyote Wells says he's got some more freight for us and we ride over to find two more cars of bob wire!

We figger that sagehen of a old Jake Baum must of bought out a bob wire factory.

The Jim and Mike Twins both go back to freightin' bob wire, stackin' it up on top of the other pile. That mountain of wire gits so high it shuts out the sceen'ry; and, lemme tell yuh, it shore gits on our nerves, which is a'most rubbed raw a'ready by the strain of all this yere fence buildin'.

"Boothill, Ah can't sleep nights with all thet bob wiah fence layin' around," Alamo Massey confesses to me.

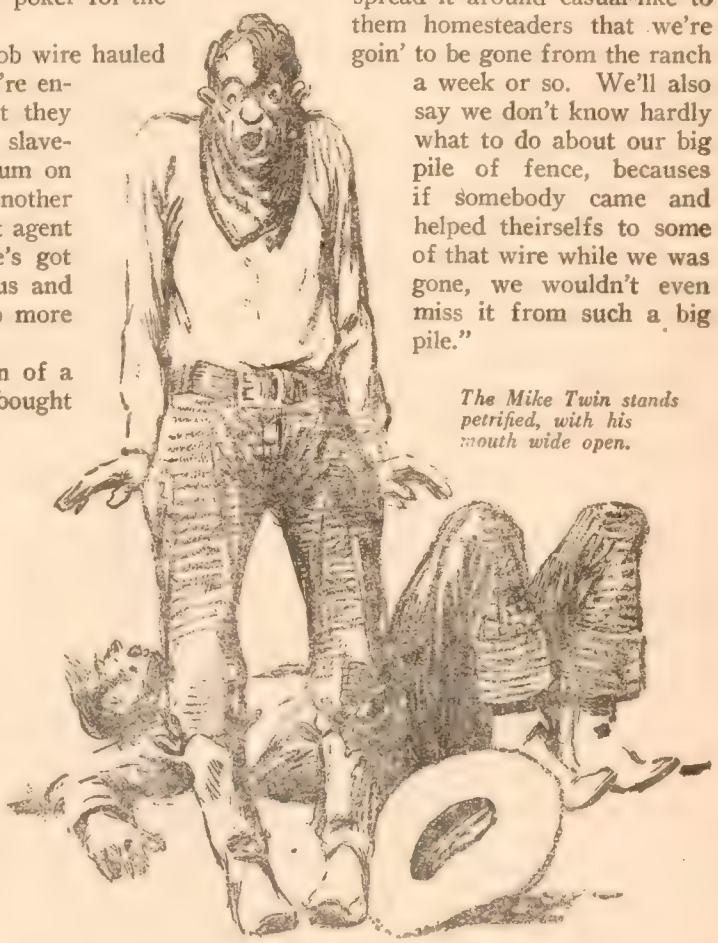
"Me, neither," I states. "And I been turnin' over a scheme in my head t' git rid of some of that wire."

"Yore scheme don't mean startin' in to build fence, does it, Boothill?" Alamo asks.

"No," I tell him. "It's a scheme what will not only remove this wire but also benefit humanity. Consider of them fool homesteaders over on Bill Creek; they're always a-buildin' of fences. It seems t' be their favorite outdoor pastime. Why not be neighborly and let 'em have this wire?"

"Yuh mean give it to 'em, Boothill?" inquires Alamo.

"Certainly not," I tell him. "We ain't no philanthrowpists, Alamo, and, besides, Jake Baum might not like it if he heard we was givin' away his wire. No, we'll spread it around casual-like to them homesteaders that we're goin' to be gone from the ranch a week or so. We'll also say we don't know hardly what to do about our big pile of fence, becauses if somebody came and helped theirselfs to some of that wire while we was gone, we wouldn't even miss it from such a big pile."



The Mike Twin stands petrified, with his mouth wide open.

That looks like a brilliant bit of brainwork, so we drop them hints to them homesteaders and disappears from the ranch for a'most two weeks. When we ride back, shore 'nough, that Pike's Peak pile of wire is a lot smaller. Folks has shore helped theirselfs free-like to old Jake's wire.

"Boothill, it was a flash of genius, that ideer of yores," remarks Windy Bill. "All we got to do now is to let people know

we're leavin' the ranch for a whole month, and when we come back there won't be no wire left a-tall."

"That's the ideer," I states. "Then we'll write Jake Baum somebody stole all his wire, which news I'm bettin' will discourage that infernal old greenhorn to where he simply drops the ideer of fencin' up this ranch."

Before we can put that scheme into effect, the sheriff lopes up to see us one mornin'.

"Howdy, Boothill," he greets me. "I got some news. While you was gone, a bunch of farmers come over and jest natcherally hauled off half yore bob wire. But don't worry. I've rounded up all the guilty parties and told 'em to haul that wire back yere to-day. Now, do you want them snakes arrested or would you prefer settlin' with 'em personal-like?"

"No, Sheriff," I says, dazed by this bad news. "We'll let 'em off this time, hopin' it'll be a lesson to 'em. We're shore obliged t' you for gittin' back this wire."

"Which we are, like hell," says the Jim Twin after that nosey sheriff rides off.

After them farmers brung back that bob wire, there is that original mountain of wire loomin' high as ever. On top of that, two more carloads of wire arrives and when we got that hauled, that pile of fencin' is a landmark for miles around. It spoils our appetites; we can't enjoy our poker games no more.

On top of which also drops in another letter from old Jake Baum, stringin' along as folls.:

> "How is that fencin' comin' along, hey? Don't be so dang modest about what you're doin' on it; send me a report on how many miles of fence you finished, so I'll know you ain't asleep on the job. If you run out of bob wire, don't be bashful about sayin' so.
>
> Yores, truly,
>
> JAKE BAUM."

"Run out o' bob wire!" hollers Windy Bill. "We'll run out o' wire the same time the Pacific runs out of water."

It looks like all that old cuss of a Jake Baum does is sit around all day and think up unpleasant things to write us. I hate to pain the old feller by tellin' him we ain't built no fence a-tall yet, so I answers evasive-like as folls.:

> "Mr. Jake Baum, President,
> The Window-sash Land & Cattle Co.,
> Capital, $500,000.00.
>
> Dear Sir & Friend Jake:
>
> Well, how's yore gizzard by this time, Jake? Ours ain't so good, lemme tell yuh. Workin' on that fence in our spare time shore does exhaust us and wear down our vitality t' where we can't hardly set up to our meals.
>
> As to a report on that there fence, I takes my pen in hand t' report in behalf of my hard-workin' comrades that the fence is progressin' along as fast as could be expected. In fact, Jake, I'd be safe in puttin' it even stronger than that. Jest keep yore shirt in yore pants and don't git excited about this fence, Jake, as you'd shore ride a hell of a long ways off to find a more industrious bunch of cowboys than us.
>
> Yores Truly & Very Sincerely Yores,
> BOOTHILL BOGGS."

Durin' the next couple of weeks we shore is active on that fence. We scouts around and finds some patches of timber what would yield up good posts, and most of them posts could be cut from hossback, too. Then we figger we ought to write old Jake Baum for some new axes and a wire stretcher, but somehow we never git that far, bein' kind o' tired out by this time account all the labor we been doin'. This fence building is even more wearyin' work than we ever thought it would be.

Yessir, any other punchers would of got so discouraged by all this extry work of surroundin' a big ranch with a fence that they would of pulled their freights and told old Jake Baum to build his own fence. But Windy Bill and Alamo Massey and the Mike and Jim Twins and yore Uncle Botthill Boggs, we're not the cowboys what would pull out and leave a boss stuck in a mudhole.

Anyway, yere we are, sort of restin' up from our toil of figgerin' on that fence and thinkin' we'll even start buildin' a little mebbe next year when in comes an-

other letter from old Jake, sort of heated-like.

"Hey, what ails you fellers? That last letter o' yores wasn't no report. Be more specific, givin' figures as to how many miles of fence has been built and hustle that report back in the next mail as I'm gittin' dang weary over this matter.

Yores truly,
JAKE BAUM."

Well, that letter gits all of us on the peck. Jake may be gittin' weary, but he ain't half as weary as we are. I fires back a indignant but dignified letter as folls.:

"Mr. Jake Baum, President,
The Window-sash Land & Cattle Co.,
Capital, $500,000.00.

Dear Sir & Friend Jake:

Well, Jake, how's yore liver by this time? Ours ain't so good. This tough work of fence buildin' shorely don't agree with us.

I note by yore letter that you seem t' want a specific report as to miles of fence we have built, and I takes my pen in hand to report we don't know exactly how many miles, but you can take it from us that it would shore surprise you a lot to see how fast this yere fence is goin' up. Yeah, it shore would. And don't forgit that you'd shore ride a hell of a long ways off to find a more industrious and hardworkin' bunch of cowboys than us, and in special when it comes to buildin' fence in their spare time.

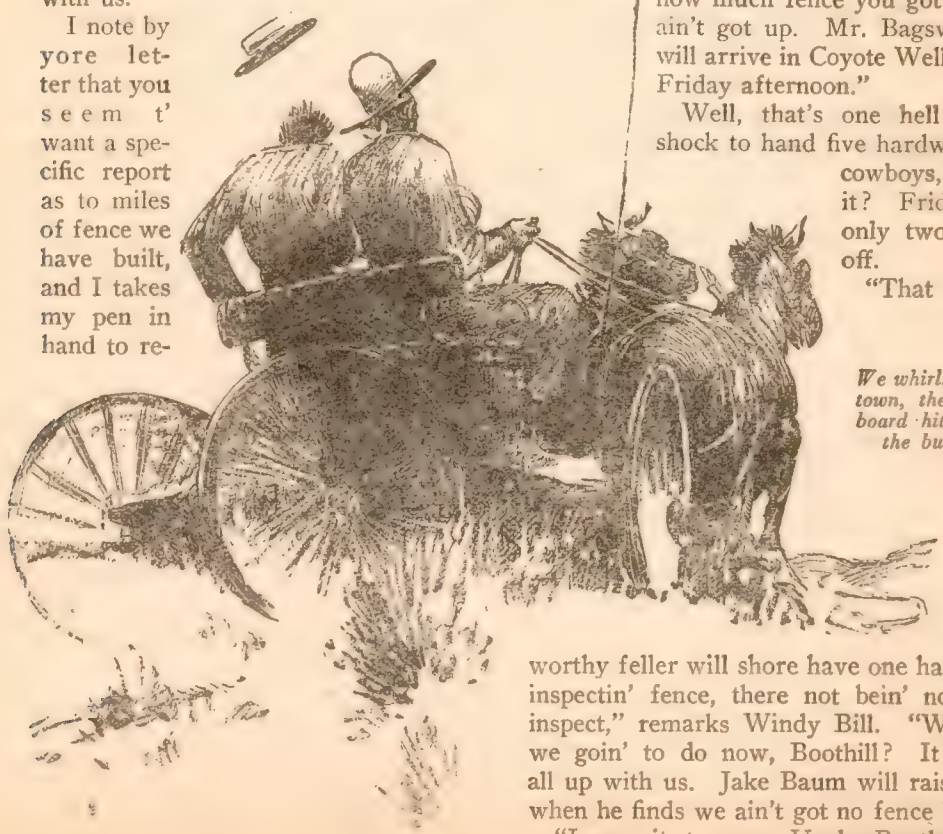
Yores Truly & Very Sincerely Yores,
BOOTHILL BOGGS."

You'd think that shore is a letter to ca'm down old Jake, wouldn't you? Well, if you think it, you shore don't know old Jake. Yere he fires back this in reply:

"Well, I ain't foolin around no more. Since you boys won't send no specific report regardin' the progress of fencin' the ranch, I'm sendin' out a feller from my office yere, a Mr. Bagsworthy, to inspect that fence and make a report as to how much fence you got up or ain't got up. Mr. Bagsworthy will arrive in Coyote Wells next Friday afternoon."

Well, that's one hell of a shock to hand five hardworkin' cowboys, ain't it? Friday is only two days off.

"That Bags-



We whirls out of town, the buckboard hittin' all the bumps.

worthy feller will shore have one hard job inspectin' fence, there not bein' none to inspect," remarks Windy Bill. "What're we goin' to do now, Boothill? It looks all up with us. Jake Baum will raise hell when he finds we ain't got no fence built."

"Leave it to yore Uncle Boothill," I

answers ca'm as a jellyfish. "I got a plan to fix all this, but I'm afraid it looks like we might have to swaller our pride and build a little stretch of fence after all. Just a half mile or so. We'll git it up tomorrer and then when this Bagsworthy tenderfoot comes, we'll put on a show for him that'll shore entertain him."

"What kind of a show, Boothill?" inquires Alamo.

I explains to 'em my scheme and the boys approve of it with a whoop.

Next mornin', early us Window-sashers springs into action like a outlaw bronc when his blind is yanked off. The Twins lope down into the timber armed with a coupla axes to cut posts. Alamo hauls them posts and the wire we need over to where we're buildin' the fence. Me and Windy Bill plays gopher and digs the postholes.

Lemme tell yuh, us five shore sweats that day! The Twins throw out posts equal to fifteen Mexicans. You can't see the sceen'ry for the dust me and Windy Bill raises excavatin' them postholes. Alamo he lopes a team and waggin down for them posts and comes back, stickin' in a post at each hole and tampin' dirt around it. Then Alamo unrolls and stretches the wire while me and Windy Bill rides along on a coupla small hosses and reaches down t' tack in staples.

We git so we can a'most ride along diggin' holes and settin' posts and stretchin' wire and tackin' in staples and hardly have to git off a hoss.

The gang from the next ranch, the Fryin' Pan, happens to learn about this fence-buildin' industry of ours, and they flock in to see this strange sight of a fence bein' built on this range. It's the only cow fence they ever saw and it interests 'em all same as seein' Billy the Kid's ghost.

This Fryin' Pan is owned and bossed by that ornary old shoot-'em-in-back, "Tearful" Teeters. Tearful and all his nine riders jogs over to that fence and sets their hosses near where me and Windy Bill is diggin' holes and them rustlers casts slurrin' remarks about cowboys what would lower theirselfs to do such degradin' work.

Which gits me and Windy Bill het up to a point where we starts scatterin' lead wild and reckless over the sceen'ry, in special over the sceen'ry near them Fryin' Panners, and they lope out of there. It gits so we enjoy consider'ble privacy with our fence buildin'.

"Ah'm jes' about exhausted from haulin' posts," complains Alamo toward night. "Ah ain't no mule skinnah. Ah bet muh constitution nevah does recovah from the strain of this day's work. Them pore Twins, too, is actually gittin' callouses on theah hands from cuttin' posts."

"Buck up, Alamo," I tells him. "We can all stand a day's fencin'. To-morrer we'll prepare for this feller Jake Baum's sending out to inspect this fence. I'm bettin' that after he goes we won't hear no more about fence from old Jake Baum."

Next day with a half mile of fence up, I leave the rest of the boys all set to prepare for that tenderfoot, while I drive to Coyote Wells to meet his train. Before I come to the station, I wrap some bandage around my head, and stick my left arm in a sling, appearin' some like I went through a small-sized war.

When this tenderfoot of a Bagsworthy waltzes in on the train, I'm settin' in the buckboard waitin' for him. He's a young feller with mild-lookin' blue eyes and jest the rough, hardy sort of hombre what teaches in these yere Sunday Schools.

"Why, what has happened to you, Mr. Boggs?" he inquires right off, as he notices I got a bandage on my head and got my left arm in a sling.

"War, Mr. Bagsworthy!" I tell him. "War! Bloodshed! The bloodiest war ever knowed on this range has busted loose right on the ranch and these wounds is souvenirs."

"A war!" he exclaims. "Why, what's it about?"

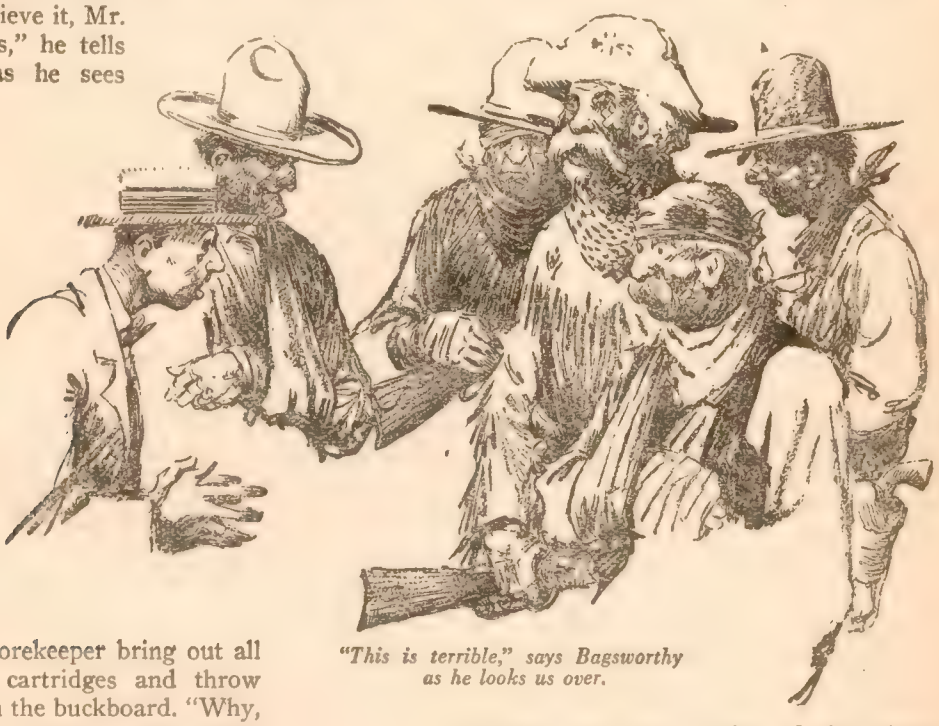
"It's about this fence we're buildin', Mr. Bagsworthy," I inform him, as I drive my team down the street of Coyote Wells with one hand and stops before the store. "Hey!" I bellers at the storekeeper. "Bring me out fifty boxes of .45's, forty boxes .30-.30's, and sixty boxes of .45-.70's, and do it quick. Why, my young

friend," I goes on to explain to this feller, Bagsworthy, "I have bad news for you. That fence Jake Baum ordered built has precipitated what is the deadliest war we ever saw on this or any other cow range."

"Why?" he inquires astonished-like.

"People's tryin' to cut that fence," I tell him. "All the other ranchers is opposed to a fence in this country. They ain't used to no fence and they won't stand for no land bein' fenced up. The result is that if we didn't fight 'em off they would cut our fence plumb to pieces. We got to guard our fence night and day."

"I can't hardly believe it, Mr. Boggs," he tells me as he sees the storekeeper bring out all them cartridges and throw 'em in the buckboard. "Why, this is awful. Why didn't you write Mr. Baum about this trouble?"



"This is terrible," says Bagsworthy as he looks us over.

"Why worry old Jake about a little matter like this?" I tells him. "It's our business to pertect ranch property, ain't it? We don't mind a few scratches, only we regret we ain't got no more fence built than we have. We been so busy guardin' the fust half mile of that fence we ain't had no time to build any more of it. Us boys is all sort of shot up, but we ain't discouraged. Well, I got to hurry back to the ranch. The boys was about all out of ammunition when I left."

We whirl out of town, the broncs on the lope, and the buckboard hittin' all the bumps, while them parcels of cartridges bounce all over the floor of the rig and on to Mr. Bagsworthy's feet. He withdraws his feet from the vicinity of that ammunition like it scares him to even touch it.

"Nossir, they ain't cut that fence nowhere yet, but they're a-swarmin' around tryin' to do it night and day," I goes on to remark. "But don't you worry none, as there won't be a wire of that there fence cut as long as us five punchers got a drop of blood between us to shed in its defence. We wasn't much in favor of buildin' a fence," I tell him, "but after we had some of it built, we shore wasn't goin' to stand for no degenerate renegades a-manglin' it up."

It's about dusk as we approach the ranch. As I lope the broncs to where we gits a sight of the fence, we can hear the boomin' of guns in the distance, six-shooters and rifles mixed up.

"My Gawd!" says this Bagsworthy feller, sort of shrinkin' up at all that cannonadin'. "Can this be possible? Is this a dream?"

As we drive up, Alamo and the Twins and Windy Bill is layin' in a old buffalo waller emptyin' their guns at the horizon. They tell us a mob of cowboys has been tryin' to git at that fence all day.

"You're jes' in time, Boothill!" yowells Alamo. "We was down to our last round of ca'tridges."

Alamo and the Twins and Windy Bill is ornamented up with bandages also, all of 'em havin' two or more wounds apiece. Standin' us up t'gether, we look like we was in a war and we done about all the fightin' that was done. One of the Twins is limpin' in both legs.

"This is terrible," says Bagsworthy as he looks us over, but we only tells him to forgit it and git under cover. We shoves a rifle into his hands and tell him to use it on them fence-cuttin' hombres which is over the hill ready to charge on our fence.

"But there must be some compromise for this," he says.

"What compromise can there be?" I asks. "Them hombres is tryin' to cut our fence, ain't they? Cuttin' a fence is a crime on the same level with stealin' hosses with us. Sheddin' them renegades' blood is the only compromise."

"You said it," says Windy Bill. "Yere after we labor night and day erectin' a wire fence, are we to allow some miserable hoss-thiefs to come pirootin' up and ruin its looks? If that ain't cause for bloodshed, what is?"

We keep up that brisk fire until it's dark and every time a gun goes off, Bagsworthy shivers. He shivers so dang often he looks like he had the chills.

"We's got to camp out yere nights to pertect this fence," I tell him as dark falls. "It'll be sort of rough on you at fust, but you'll soon git used to it."

We has supper, disturbed only a coupla times when we has a alarm of some unhung son-of-a-guns about to attack our fence, causin' us to dive for our buffalo waller.

Durin' the night we patrols that fence in shifts, two of us ridin' up and down at all hours. We let things quiet down until that Bagsworthy falls asleep, and then we start off the fireworks.

"Fork yore hosses and ride over yere!" yowells Windy Bill who's ridin'. "They're attackin' in force. Git yore guns! Kill the hoss-thiefs!"

"Yow-ee!" yells Alamo, springin' to his feet and lettin' off one of his six-shooters. "Let 'em come!"

Over on the next hill the Twins is planted, a-blazin' away with their rifles in our direction. We blaze back at 'em for two hours, occasionally chargin' 'em while they occasionally charges us. Meanwhile we keeps up a rip-roaring bombardment.

"It's that Tearful Teeter's crowd from the Fryin' Pan Ranch," says Alamo, ridin' in claimin' a fresh wound in his right leg, which me and Alamo bandages with some rags we bloodied up from a beef we killed the day before.

The rest of that night shore is a holy terror for that Bagsworthy hombre. The Twins keep up their end of the firin' sort o' spasmodic-like until daylight. When mornin' busts, we grab off a hurried breakfast. That Bagsworthy ain't got no more appetite than a sick chicken. We urge him to put a lot of grub under his belt as we have a hard day of fightin' in prospect, but even that don't help his appetite much.

"Undoubtedly it was that Tearful Teeters' gang from the Fryin' Pan, conductin' that wire-cuttin' raid last night," I remarks. "I move we go over and wipe out them Fryin' Panners to-day."

"Second that motion!" bawls the Twins, who has showed up for breakfast.

"But, listen," groans this tenderfoot of a Bagsworthy. "This has got to be stopped. Blood shouldn't be shed over such a trivial matter as a fence. It's too awful to contemplate."

"Awful! What's awful to contemplate about shootin' up them theah fence-cuttin' polecats on the Fryin' Pan?" Alamo asks him. "It'll be jes' a pleasure fo' us, thet's all."

"Give me one day to fix this up," he begs. "Give me time to go to Coyote

Wells before you start this wipin' out of the Fryin' Pan."

"All right," we agree reluctant. "We'll postpone openin' the festivities one day. We need more ammunition, anyway."

We tell him to bring us back from town forty more boxes of .45 caliber cartridges, sixty boxes of .45-.70's, and seventy-five boxes of .30-.30's. We reckon that ought to be enough ammunition to last us a few days. He shudders as he promises to git them cartridges and spurs off for Coyote Wells.

That night he shows up, his hoss all lathered up.

"I've fixed it!" he gasps joyful-like. "This fence-cuttin' war is ended. I wired Jake Baum, explainin' that puttin' a fence around this ranch has brung on a bloody war. I told him this country was too wild and primitive to stand for a fence. Now, you boys forgit all about guardin' this yere fence. Let 'em cut it up if they want to. Bloodshed must be prevented at all costs. We don't want lives risked over a fence."

It's shore a strain for us to forgit all the outrages of them fence-cuttin' hombres, but we fin'ly lets Bagsworthy persuade us into swallerin' our pride and consentin' to forgit all about this yere fence.

"What'll we do about all this pile of bob wire?" we ask that Bagsworthy as he prepares to travel back East.

"I don't care what is done with it," he states. "All I know is that this country is too wild and primitive to stand for a fence."

After he's gone, we take them rolls of bob wire and roll 'em down the hill into the arroyo at the bottom to sort o' git 'em out of our sight. Alamo and Windy Bill and the Twins and me doubt a whole lot whether Jake Baum will ever have any use for that wire. As long as *this* outfit of cowboys is in the vicinity, this country is shore goin' to stay too dang wild and primitive to stand for a fence!

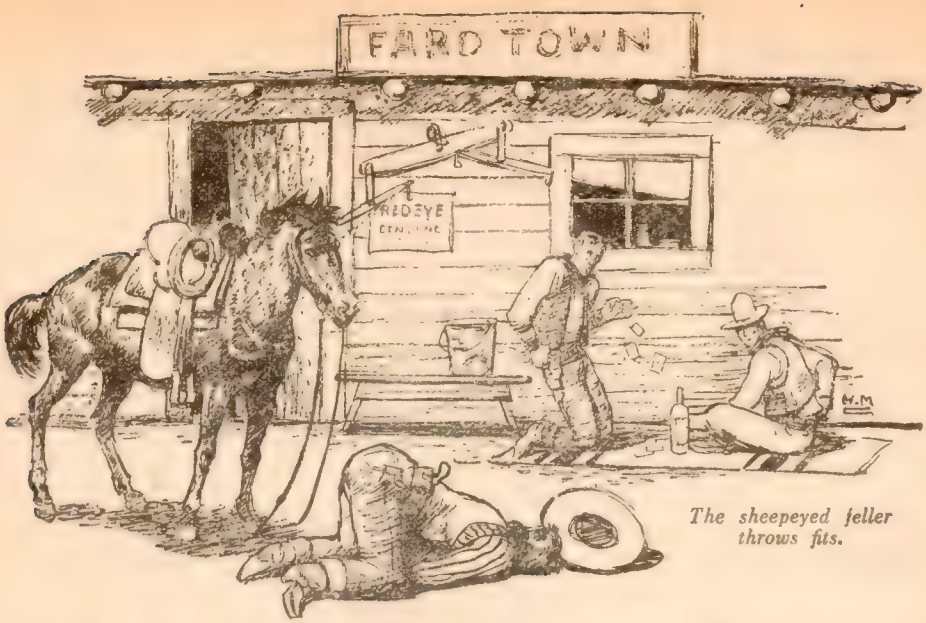
(*Did you enjoy reading this story? See Page* 168.)

CONCERNING CHAPS

"CHAPS," "shaps" or, to give them their full name, chaparejos, as the name indicates, were brought into the cattle business by the early Mexican vaqueros. Their primary purpose is to protect the rider's legs from brush and to serve the purpose of overalls to protect the cowboy's clothing in his work-a-day world. The chaparejos of the early Mexicans, suiting their taste for the gaudy, were startlingly brilliant with their gold and silver conchas studdings, and with their stamped and pressed leather and their colors. But the American cowboy in adopting them looked more to the utility of that bit of working apparel; and save for range "dandies" or "tenderfoot" cowboys, the embossed, stamped and bestudded chaps are rarely found on the range.

There are three types of chaps, but for real utility and comfort the "Texas" type, the "bat" or "Buzzard-wing" variety is the most popular. These chaps can be donned by merely laying them across the legs and reaching underneath, snapping a few metal catches, and buckling the belt. They do not have to be crawled into or drawn on as one's pants are put on, nor does one need to lay aside spurs when the chaps are to be put on or taken off. The side extension or wings of these "Texas" chaps vary in width, but the accepted width is about five inches. The lightweight variety weighs about six pounds and costs from twenty dollars up. There is a heavier variety for use in extra thick brush or in the corral where the rider's thighs and hips are subjected to the constant pressure of the rope. These weigh and cost a little more. They are fitted with loops and leather buttons for fastening the legs shut and the belt is extra wide and strong. Plain finished, they cost somewhere around about twenty-five dollars a pair.

There is a closed leg variety that is more ornamental than serviceable. This can also be said of the heavy, hairy angora chaps. They are used on the northern range for warmth in winter; but in snow, sleet or rainstorms they prove mighty uncomfortable, for they get wet, soggy, heavy and very unpleasant. They are not very popular on the range, the movies and rodeos notwithstanding.



The sheepeyed feller throws fits.

HINDOO HOMBRES

By Paul Everman

Illustrated by H. MELOY

The boys earn their grub, but not a-tall like they figgered on.

SHEEPEYE RIGGINS brung the news about the Hindoos. Me an' Nueces Slim, who, along with Sheepeye an' ol' Buckskin Bones, was sole proprietors, city officials, voters an' citizens of Faro Town, first notices Sheepeye's queer actions when he comes a-ridin' in wild from that prickly-pear country down along the Rio Grande.

Sheepeye he's all doubled up like a jackass in the rain, an' he reels drunk-like in the saddle. His pony stops immejut right in the Faro Town plaza. The sheepeyed feller falls off in the sand, an' rolls an' kicks an' throws fits, all the time gaspin' an' groanin'.

Me an' Nueces Slim, who had been playin' seven-up on a Navajo blanket in front of the delinquent Three Star Saloon, throws down our hands, an' runs to the aid of our afflicted pard. But we see that it's only a laughin' fit that ails him.

"Where's Buckskin?" he giggles, when he's finally able to set up again.

Buckskin Bones, the ol' scout an' Injun-fighter, who's kinda boss o' our outfit an' the marshal of our city, sticks his head out a 'dobe door. He wears his usual costoom of mocassins, leggins and fringed shirt.

"Doo-ee mind, now!" he cautions Sheepeye. "Hobble an' side-line that loud lip o' yourn till I git done talkin' over the tellyphone!" An' he fades inside.

Well, Sheepeye tells me an' Nueces Slim what it is that's hit him on the funny-bone. Down in the prickly-pear along the river, he's flushed the gol-durnedest outfit that a man ever set eyes on.

"They's a covered wagon," says he. "Two mules—a white one an' a claybank son-of-a-gun. A galoot named Flanagan owns the wagon an' the mules. An' in the wagon he's got six liver-complected Hindoos. They've got bandages wound round their heads like folks gits at hospitals after fights, only different. An', boys," says he, bustin' his fist on his knee, "them Hindoos is gonna make us some money! Do we need it?"

We shore did! Yuh see, me an' Sheepeye an' Buckskin Bones an' Nueces Slim was ol' trail pardners. We'd moseyed in-

to Faro Town three days ago. The owner an' only resident o' said Faro Town, which had been dyin' steady an' complete for twenty years, was a discouraged gent named Wilcox.

Things had sashayed around to a game o' cards. Afore long, this here Wilcox was bettin' his whole town against a hundred iron men that Buckskin produces out o' his right mocassin. Buckskin knows his cards, an' it all ends up with Wilcox givin' him a deed for the town, which includes a coupla wuthless sections stretchin' clean to the Rio Grande bank. Bein' a square man, Buckskin gives Wilcox the hundred to quit the country on.

An' here we was, us four, with Faro Town on our hands. It was jest a ghost town, with twenty-one empty saloons an' dance-halls, an up-to-date telephone, three full-grown cemeteries, an' a hell-raisin' past.

It kinda tickled ol' Buckskin to own a whole town. At his suggestion, we elected him Marshal, an' he made himself a badge out of a piece of tin can, paintin' the word "Marshal" on it with red Injun war-paint he made by boilin' a certain kind o' soft rocks.

"Doo-ee mind, now!" he'd tell us. "We'll make a boom town out o' this place yet!" But now, after two days, the grub was gettin' low, our cash was the same, an' the lack of excitement was so intense that desperate measures was necessary.

We could hear Buckskin still talkin' over the telephone, as Sheepeye goes on.

"One o' them Hindoos is sick. They done moved him out o' the wagon an' carried him into a little shack down in the edge o' that prickly-pear," Sheepeye says. "This here Flanagan is anxious to git movin' again, but his passengers balks on leavin' their sick pardner till he's plumb well or dead. An' that sick hombre says he knows he'll die, but he *can't* die"—Sheepeye throws another laughin' fit—"he says he can't die, unless he's got an ol' cow's tail in his hand!"

From what he says, it seems that these here Hindoos has got funny religious customs. They think a cow is a sacred critter, an' if a dyin' man ain't holdin' on to an ol' cow's tail at the time of his passin' out, he's dang shore to take a pasear into a climate where she's hot the whole year round.

"Flanagan's in a hurry to move on," explains Sheepeye. "He's beggin' me to furnish him with an ol' cow's tail, so's this sufferin' gent can die peaceful an' immejut, an' the outfit can move on. So it's up to us fellers to ketch a cow fer him. They's fifty dollars in it."

I look around and see ol' Buckskin Bones squattin' down, Injun fashion, right behind us. He's quit his telephonin', an' has managed to take in most o' Sheepeye's marvelous news. But he don't 'pear much interested. He smooths the fringe on his buckskin jacket, removes his low-crowned hat, allowin' his long gray hair to stream down over his raw-boned shoulders, an' cocks his sharp eyes on the distant horizon.

"Gents," he remarks, "I've killed buffler, an' hunted lobos with dogs, an' freighted dynamite an' powder, an' punched cows all the way from the Rio Grande to the Canady line. I've lost ten thousan' dollars on the turn of a cyard. I've fit Cheyennes an' Rapahoes an' Kiowas an' Comanches. Thar ain't many things I've missed, I reckon. But they's one thing I come durn near missin'. Ontel yestiddy," he says, "I'd never talked over a tellyphone."

"Are yuh gonna help us ketch that cow fer Flanagan an' the Hindoos?" asts Sheepeye.

"I know Tin-horn Flanagan," says Buckskin. "I cain't say sartin yit whether I'll he'p ketch any cow fer him an' his Hindagoes. What do ye allow to do with that fifty dollars?"

"Grub!" says Sheepeye.

"Grub!" reproaches Buckskin.

An' the ol' long-hair goes on to say that he's got a better use for the money. Early this mornin' he's been talkin' to the switch-board gal at Vinegaron, an' she says the telephone company's gonna cut out our telephone unless certain back telephone dues, amountin' to forty-eight dollars an' fifty cents, is paid immejut.

"We-uns has got to keep that telly-

phone," says Buckskin. "Without that tellyphone, we're marooned out hyar, an' this town o' ourn ain't wuth a tenderfoot's cuss."

Him an' Sheepeye argys some, an' finally he admits that this here Flanagan is Sheepeye's game.

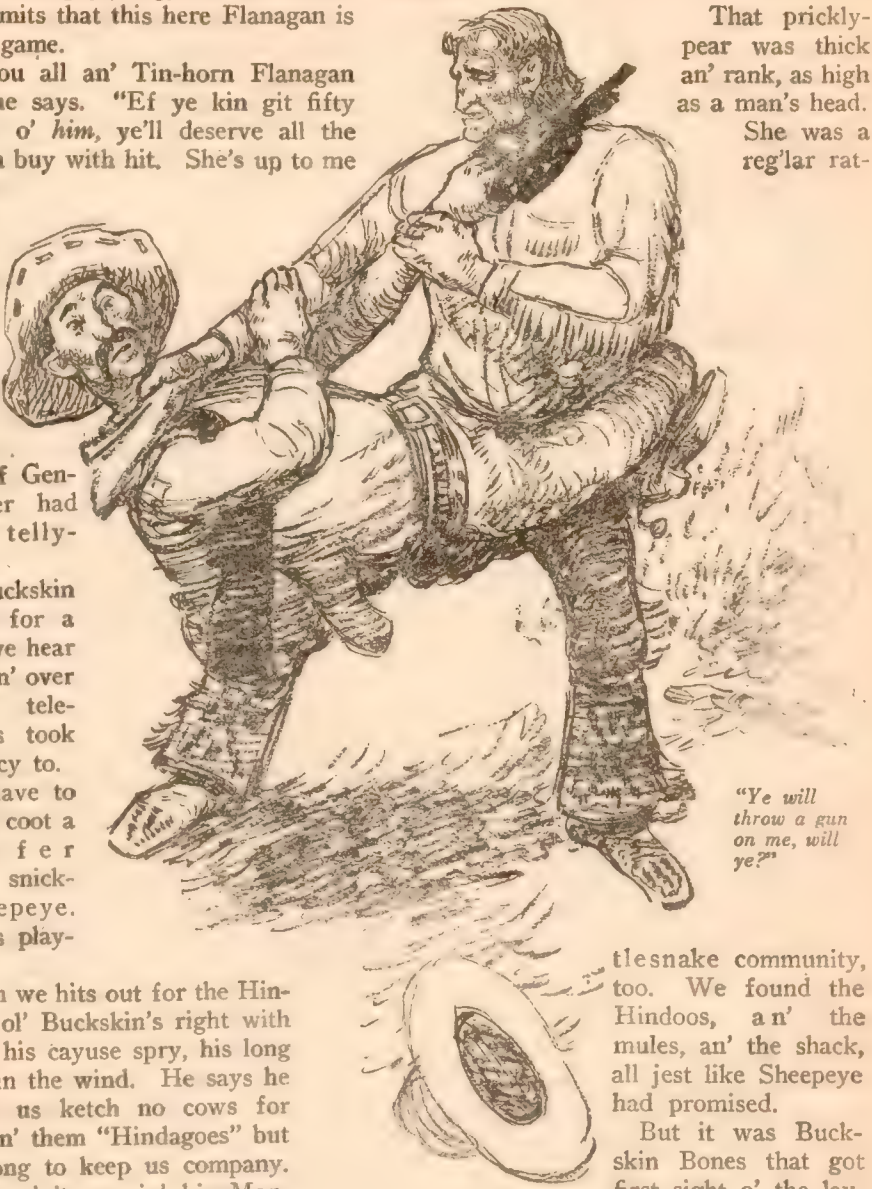
"Hit's you all an' Tin-horn Flanagan fer hit!" he says. "Ef ye kin git fifty dollars out o' *him*, ye'll deserve all the grub ye kin buy with hit. She's up to me to save the tellyphone, I reckon. Gents," he orates, serious, "the hist'ry o' this country would 'a' b e e n different ef General Custer had had a tellyphone!"

Well, Buckskin disappears for a little, an' we hear him a-talkin' over this here telephone he's took sech a fancy to.

"We'll have to buy the ol' coot a hobby-hoss f e r Crismus," snickers Sheepeye. "He craves playthings."

But when we hits out for the Hindoo camp, ol' Buckskin's right with us, forkin' his cayuse spry, his long hair flyin' in the wind. He says he won't help us ketch no cows for Flanagan an' them "Hindagoes" but he'll go along to keep us company. I notice he ain't wearin' his Marshal's star. But he's packin' his single-action Frontier six, an' they's a .44 Winchester saddle-gun in the boot under his leg, an' he carries an eight-inch Bowie knife on his hip.

When we get down to the edge of the prickly-pear, we see a coupla riders in the distance. Sheepeye says they're cowboys from the J-F outfit, an' they're throwin' a round-up. He'd met 'em earlier in the mornin'.



"Ye will throw a gun on me, will ye?"

That prickly-pear was thick an' rank, as high as a man's head. She was a reg'lar rattlesnake community, too. We found the Hindoos, an' the mules, an' the shack, all jest like Sheepeye had promised.

But it was Buckskin Bones that got first sight o' the layout. He goes crashin' in ahead of us to the little clearin' where the outfit was located. When we broke in after him, he was jumpin' out of his saddle. A pink-faced ol' cuss with a heavy red mustache was standin' by the covered wagon. Ol'

Buckskin lets out a blood-curdlin' Comanche war whoop, an' charges straight for this buzzard. First thing we knowed, they was all tangled up in a wild wrasslin' encounter.

"Ye will throw a gun on me, will ye?" roars Buckskin, heelin' this gent over backwards.

It happens that the red-mustached feller is none other than Tin-horn Flanagan. Sheepeye takes it on himself to do some peacemakin', an' persuades Buckskin to tame down an' let Tin-horn up. It seems that Tin-horn has got trigger-nervous an' pulled for his gun—an' it was no wonder, Buckskin crashin' in on him unexpected out o' the brush that-a-way.

"Wal, nobody got hurt—nobody but Tin-horn," says Buckskin, standin' off a ways an' whettin' his Bowie knife on his thumb. "How air ye, anyways, Tin-horn Flanagan? Hit's been eeny-most thutty year sence I met up last with ye an' yore cold deck at the ol' Road to Ruin Saloon in Corona."

Tin-horn Flanagan blinks anxious. "Is Buckskin Bones a friend o' yourn?" he asts Sheepeye, who he has reckernized.

"It all depends," says Sheepeye, "on whether er no Buckskin helps us ketch that cow fer yuh."

Then he goes on to explain to Flanagan that he's brung his three pardners, Nueces Slim an' Buckskin Bones an' Broncho Evans (which last is me) to help ketch a cow for the fifty bucks an' the dyin' Hindoo.

"Well, that fifty-dollar offer still stands pervidin' you kin suit this here Hindoo's dyin' wish," says Flanagan. "But jest you stow that knife, Buckskin."

"These hyar Hindagoes friends o' yourn?" inquires Buckskin.

"Never seed 'em afore this mornin'," swears Flanagan. "I was drivin' along with my mules an' my wagon awhile ago, an' I run acrost these six Hindoo pilgrims, all a-staggerin' from fat-te-goo. 'With so much room goin' to waste,' thinks I, 'I'd be plumb heartless not to offer 'em a ride.' "

"Ye allus was a generous varmint, Tin-horn," says the ol' long-hair, sarcastic.

"Yas," admits Tin-horn. "I was borned with tender feelin's, I guess. But my patience has got a limit. I got a business engagement in Pampas, this evenin', an' I can't wait much longer on these Hindoo hombres. One of 'em is bad sick—appendicitis, I guess it is. So I agrees to stop here till he gets well—er somethin'. But he's got to be damn quick about it. If you gents can ketch a cow, I'm willin' to humor him to the extent o' lettin' him die with that cow's tail in his hand, like it's customary in the religion he growed up in. But if these hombres want to ride with me, there'll have to be a damn quick funeral!"

"Ye allus was a patient man, Tin-horn," murmurs Buckskin, sweet. "Do ye mean to say you've done put up this fifty dollars Sheepeye mentions, jest to honor the dyin' custom of a durned Hindago?"

"Not exackly," Flanagan says, hasty-like. "These Hindoo gents has made up a pool amongst themselves."

"Let's ketch the cow," butts in Sheepeye, who's r'arin' to go.

"No," says Buckskin, sonterin' over to the shack. "Let's take a look-see at these Hindagoes."

Well, five o' them Hindoos was inside the shack, kneelin' round the sixth one, who was stretched on the dirt floor. They was dressed in white cotton clothes, like Sheepeye had mentioned. An' they wore them bandages around their heads, like he's also said. They jabber like a bunch o' blackbirds on a dead sheep's carcass, all but the sick one, who groans in a kinda Navajo lingo, which we took to mean, if it was translated proper: "I want an ol' cow's tail."

Buckskin kicks a coupla them hombres aside, an' stoops down over the sick man, an' straightens up, an' grunts like an Injun. All at oncet, he goes for his gun. A rope o' flame belches out, an' that ol' Frontier six makes a noise like a ton of dynamite at the height of its glory.

"Some shootin', ol' scout!" yells Nueces Slim, when the smoke's cleared away, an' we make out six Hindoos, includin' the sick one, flat on their bellies. "Six Hindoos at one shot!"

Buckskin stalks around, an' kicks each one o' the Hindoos in the seat o' the cotton pants.

"Git up!" he grunts. "An' doo-ee keep yore paw away from yore gun, Tin-horn Flanagan!"

He goes over to a dark corner, an' kicks a bleedin', wrigglin' rattlesnake out where we can see it. It was the snake he'd done shot at.

Them Hindoos wasn't harmed a mite. They was jest scairt. But now they stands up on their hind feet, an' look first at Buckskin an' then at the dyin' snake. They jabber some more in Navajo, an' look tough. All at oncet, they jumps on Buckskin, clawin' wild like mountain lions an' women does.

"Ye will, will ye?" bellers Buckskin, battin' four of 'em to the dirt with his gun, afore we can even lift a hand to help him.

He tramps outside disgusted. Pretty soon, Tin-horn Flanagan hurries out too, an' explains that the ol' long-hair has offended the Hindoos by killin' the snake. Snakes is sacred animals where these Hindoos comes from, he says. Hindoos worships cows an' snakes an' sech. Why, they wouldn't kill a snake no more'n a cowboy'd kill a layin' hen.

He's mollified the hombres, he says, an' suggests that we ketch a cow immejut so's the sick man's end may be hastened quick an' contented-like.

"Let's earn them fifty iron cart-wheels, boys," urges Sheepeye, grabbin' his pony's reins. "Air yuh gonna help us, Buckskin?"

Buckskin stays us a minute. "No, gents," he declines. "I wouldn't insult no decent, range-born Texas cow by lettin' a dirty Hindago shake hands with hits tail! You gents go ahead, if ye want, an' earn them fifty dollars."

"An' we ain't payin' no dues fer yore new-fangled telephone out o' that fifty dollars," reminds Sheepeye, frosty. "We-'re gonna buy grub. Eats is for them that works. Giddap!"

"Doo-ee mind what I tell ye!" cautions the ol' scout. "I wish ye well. But ye're dealin' with a cold-deck gambler when ye work fer Flanagan. He done lied like hell when he said that Hindago had appendicitis. I examined the groanin' critter. They's blood on his britches. He's got a slug o' lead in his left laig. That's all. He jest *thinks* he's goin' to die."

But me an' Sheepeye an' Nueces Slim ain't in the mood to listen. Flanagan's offerin' a reward o' fifty dollars for puttin' a cow's tail in that Hindoo's hand. We figger we're plumb capable o' deliverin' the goods, an' likewise o' collectin' that reward.

So we lines out from that tall prickly-pear, us three, an' goes on the hunt of a handy cow.

The country jest above that prickly-pear thicket was rollin' cattle range, broken by occasional dry creeks an' gullies. We swings a circle out acrost. About half a mile away, we finds a dozen-odd cows knee-high in a salt-grass draw.

"Whoopy-yee!" yells Sheepeye, foggin' in on the bunch an' cuttin' out a runty white two-year-old steer. "This here critter's plumb good enough. Let's take him in!"

The little ol' two-year-old hoists his tail, an' we're after him, hazin' him towards that green bank o' prickly-pear. Jest then, I spots two riders pullin' up their mounts on a pinnacle north a ways. They're eyein' us silent.

"Hold up!" I yells in Sheepeye's ear, racin' up alongside. "This critter's branded J-F. An' them two J-F cowboys yuh told us about is a-watchin' us funny from that pinnacle back there. If they ketch us runnin' off this steer-runt, there may be hell to pay!"

But Sheepeye only laughs reckless. "Let 'em come," he says, 'cause that ol' sheriff-dodger likes his excitement straight an' in quantity. "We'll tell 'em we've jest borryed the critter for a minute, an' ain't aimin' to use nothin' 'cept the tail."

So we sails on, with Nueces Slim, over on our right, doin' some fancy ridin' to keep the steer turned in. We're headed towards the little openin' that cuts through that tall prickly-pear to the clearin' where Flanagan an' his Hindoos is waitin'.

All at oncet, Sheepeye pulls up immejut, an' sticks his eyes out over his pony's ears.

"There's Buckskin," says he. "But who

in hell's that with him?" he wants to know.

Jest outside the thicket, to the left o' the openin', stands ol' Buckskin Bones. Beside him is a stranger, a trim, spry feller who r'ars six-feet-two in his polished boots. He's eyein' me an' Nueces Slim an' Sheepeye suspicious, an' keeps his right hand clost to his gun.

"It looks like we're ketched," I says to Sheepeye. "That feller ain't dressed like a range hand. But jest from the way he looks an' acts, I take it he's the boss-man or maybe the owner o' this here J-F round-up, an' he opines we're too old in years to be playin' pussy-in-the-corner with a cow what's branded J-F plain."

"Might be," grunts Sheepeye, an' expresses a reckless opinion that it'll take more'n this gent to keep us away from earnin' Flanagan's fifty dollars.

Ol' Buckskin Bones is makin' a medicine talk to this stranger, who keeps eyein' us in disapproval, an' shakin' his head. But the ol' scout keeps after him, an' finally said stranger nods grudgy-like.

Buckskin sonters over to us.

"This impatient gent was aimin' to stop yore play," he observes, bitin' his plug. "But I done talked him into reason. I want you fellers to earn that fifty dollars ef ye kin—tellyphone er no tellyphone. The bars is down, an' ye kin thank Buckskin Bones fer it. Take yore critter in!"

Which we done immejut! Nueces Slim turns the runty white critter from the left. I heads him on the right. An' Sheepeye Riggins takes him straight through that openin' jest like a houn' takes a rabbit through a holler log.

"Here's yore cow, Flanagan!" yells Sheepeye, pilin' his rope on the critter an' bustin' him complete jest inside the clearin'.

Me an' Nueces Slim is right handy with our piggin' strings. In a second we've got the animal hog-tied, an' he's rollin' his eyes an' beatin' his head on the dirt.

Tin-horn Flanagan hustles over to us, rubbin' his hands satisfied-like. The five healthy Hindoos is a-peekin' buzzardlike out o' the doorway o' that shack.

"Where's Buckskin Bones?" Flanagan wants to know. "Gone? Well, I hope he don't come back. I don't trust the ol' coot. He skinned me in a card game at Corona oncet. Git a move on, you fellers. We'll have to drag the cow inside the shack, 'cause that sick gent's appendix is hurtin' him somethin' orful, an' he can't be moved. These durned furriners!" he raves. "I've begged 'em an' cussed 'em, but they won't move till that sick gent dies with a cow's tail in his hand."

"Myself, I couldn't think o' nothin' sweeter that dyin' with a salty ox's tail in my hands!" smiles Nueces Slim, in his cultured way. "Next time I die, I think I'll try it."

We spits on our hands, an' grabs our runty steer an' starts draggin' him towards the shack. First thing I know, a volcano strikes me in the hindquarters. It's a Hindoo volcano. It sends me rootin' in the dirt. Them hombres has gone locoed again!

They're swarmin' over me an' Nueces Slim an' Sheepeye, bitin' an' gougin' an' clawin'. Their weight kinda bogs us down for a little minute. I can hear Sheepeye yellin', an' Nueces Slim cussin'. I manages to paw off two o' the hombres, an' kicks one in the tonsils an' lays the other one out with a liver punch.

I rise up jest in time to see Nueces Slim bustin' another one on the jaw, while he exclaims, in his cultured way: "Don't yuh scratch me again, Annabel!"

Well, it's five minutes afore the atmosphere has cleared up. Tin-horn Flanagan cusses his wilted wards, an' collects 'em an' hazes 'em back in the shack. He persuades Sheepeye to stow his gun.

"Boys," he says to us, allowin' his heavy red mustache to droop pathetic, "you ain't no more disgusted with these here durned reeligious fanatics than I am! It made 'em mad 'cause you was draggin' that albino steer. They believe cows is sacred, you know, an' they won't stand for seein' 'em treated rough."

Nueces Slim asts: "How come yuh to find out all this? Can you savvy their lingo?"

"Some," responds Flanagan. "I spent a summer in Buenos Aires oncet."

"Yore geography's twisted," observed

Nueces Slim, straightenin' his eye-glasses.

An then Sheepeye bristles up to Flanagan. "See here hombre," says he, "we've done delivered a cow, an' it's got a tail accordin' to specifications. It's up to the sick Hindoo to grab holt! But us boys aims to collect them fifty dollars!"

"Them dang fool Hindoos!" blurts Flanagan, helpless an' discouraged. "I'm plumb sorry, fellers, but they say this cow won't do! All cows is sacred, accordin' to the Hindoo reeligion, but a dyin' man's all out o' luck onless he can grab holt of the tail of a *certain kind* of a cow. That cow's got to be a hump-backed Brahma critter!"

"Dang yore hide, Flanagan, I reckon yuh're tryin' to work a skin game on us!" howls Sheepeye, goin' for his gun

"Doo-ee put that shootin'-iron back whar she belongs!" says Buckskin Bones, stalkin' out from the edge o' the prickly-pear, jest then. "Tinhorn's dead right this time, Sheepeye. Ef I do reckleck hit right, ye was to deliver a critter that'd suit the dyin' Hindago's wishes."

Buckskin Bones rises up behind the seat.

"*Gracias,* Bones," says Flanagan, his face lightin' up like a lantern globe on a dark night.

"Shet yore trap, ye varmint!" grunts the ol' long-hair. An' he tells us: "Doo-ee do what I tell ye, gents, an' mebby ye'll colleck yore fifty dollars yit. I kin reckleck when they was a good many o' them hump-backed Brahmas in this South Texas country. King an' Kennedy had a good many of 'em. They's still a few left. I know, 'cause I seed one jest a minute ago, breakin' the brush out to the aidge o' the prickly-pear. Ef ye're the cowboys ye claims to be, why cain't ye ketch the critter?"

"Show us that Brahma!" flares Sheepeye, who won't stand no aspersions on his cowpunchin' ability.

In ten minutes we've hooked up that mule team o' Flanagan's to the wagon an' drove outside to the open. We aim to ketch that Brahma cow, hog-tie him, hoist him in the back end o' the wagon, an' drive back into the clearin', with the Brahma's tail hangin' out the back end within easy reachin' distance for a dyin' Hindoo.

This way, the Hindoo gents won't be offended, 'cause they won't have no chanst to witness our rough treatment on the sacred Brahma. An' Flanagan, who's r'arin' to hit the trail, has promised to have the dyin' Hindoo moved out o' the shack to the open, where it'll be more convenient for him to shake hands with the Brahma's tail. Meantime, we'd turned the little albino steer loose.

"That six-foot gent in the polished boots seems to have vamoosed," I remarks to Buckskin, who's drivin' the mules, grunts, an' pulls up.

"Thar's yore Brahma," he says, pointin'. "Now go in an' bring him out!"

We locates the critter. He's standin' back a ways in that deep cactus thicket. He's kinda dun color, with a red spot on

the left shoulder. He's got tol'able horns that's whitish-like in color. An' wild! A reg'lar ol' brier-breaker! He'd lived round in this prickly-pear all his life, I reckon, an' no hot iron had ever teched him.

He lets out a snort an' a beller when me an' Nueces Slim an' Sheepeye edges in that thick cactus an' comes in behind him. Bang! Pop! He's off!

"I got him!" yells Sheepeye, who's blockin' the partic'lar cow-path the critter takes a notion to head into.

Sheepeye dabs his loop round them tol'able horns. The rope sings. They's a kinda collision sound. Then Sheepeye howls profane. I ketch sight o' him sailin' through the air backwards. The ol' Brahma has took saddle right out from under.

"I done got him" sings out Nueces Slim, further down the cow-path. An' then it's his rope that does the singin'. They's another collision sound. The ol' Brahma grunts, an' crashes.

"Hurry up, Broncho!" yells Nueces Slim to me. "I've done lost my eye-glasses!"

Meanwhile, I've been tearin' through that prickly-pear, an' I've got cactus scratches from my eyebrows clean down to my broken arches. By the time I've got my loop on the snortin' ol' Brahma, he's decided to be tame.

But we was shore sorry-lookin' objecks, us gents. Our clothes hung in strips. We was all bleedin' from that durned prickly-pear. It takes some time for Nueces Slim to find his lost eye-glasses, an' for Sheepeye to saddle up again.

But we had our critter! We eared him down an' hog-tied him an' drug him out into the open, where the wagon an' the mules was waitin'.

"Wonder where Buckskin Bones went?" says Sheepeye.

A voice behind the wagon speaks up. But it ain't Buckskin's voice.

"Jest reach fer the sky, yuh three jiggers!" it says. "Elevate!"

Then two riders showed up from behind the wagon. Their guns is on us. It's the two J-F cowboys we'd spied on the pinnacle awhile ago.

"Rustlin' outfit — ketched with the goods!" says one, a red-headed little runt, pointin' to the Brahma we've drug out behind us.

"Brand-blotters, I bet—an' workin' on J-F stock!" grunts t'other one.

We're kinda paralyzed for a minute. Sheepeye's face twitches, but he knows better than to pull for his gun.

The red-pointed cowboy keeps us covered. His pardner swings down, an' comes in behind us an' buckles our gun belts an' takes possession o' same. Meanwhile, we keep reachin' fer the sun.

"I don't know who these jiggers is," says the red-head. "They been hangin' out at ol' Faro Town two-three days now. Reckon they've had their eyes on J-F stock all the time. Yuh ride back to camp, Mike, an' get holt o' the Ol' Man, an' round up the rest o' the boys. It's up to the Ol' Man to decide whether we take these rustlers in to the sheriff at Vinegaron, or make 'em the guests of a necktie party."

The second cowboy straddles his hoss.

"Doo-ee wait jest a minute, ye two henchasers!" says a familiar voice. Buckskin Bones rises up behind the seat in that covered wagon, where he's been hidin' all the time. His ol' Frontier six is coverin' them two cowboys. Their paws goes up immejut.

"What air ye doin', trespassin' on my land?" demands the ol' long-hair.

"*Yore* land?" gasps the red-head.

"This hyar land is part o' the city limits o' Faro Town, which I done won off'n a gent named Wilcox," nods Buckskin. "I got a land deed fer the same." He climbs down over a wagon-wheel an' waves the mentioned document under their noses. "Ye'll obsarve," says he, "that my property includes two sections that extends clean down to the Rio Grande. Ye're on my property right now. These here gents is my pardners."

That deed impresses the cowboys. They sees their bluff is called, and proceed to lay down.

"But durn it," says the red-head, "we ketched yore pardners actin' funny with a J-F cow. That hump-backed critter over there! They've done hog-tied him, an' she looks to us like they was gettin' ready to drag the critter to a brandin' fire."

"J-F cow? Hell!" snorts ol' Buckskin. "Doo-ee jest take a clost look at that critter! Hit's got no J-F brand on hit's hide—ner nary other ir'n! Hit's a slick—an' us gents'll jest claim hit fer Faro Town!"

Shore enough, that Brahma didn't have no brand o' ownership on him. Us fellers have been too busy with him to look for brands.

Buckskin invited them J-F riders to make distance. They take the hint, an' it ain't long till they're out o' sight over the first ridge.

The ol' scout bites his plug, an' eyes us severe.

"Ye pore helpless critters!" he says. "Ye kin thank ol' Buckskin ag'in fer gettin' ye out o' trouble. I reckon this is one time that a tellyphone would 'a' come in handy fer you gents, ef ye'd wanted to call on me fer help, an' I hadn't happened to be so clost by. But mind ye! From now on, I'm done helpin' ye!"

Me an' Nueces Slim an' Sheepeye gets to work, an' manages to hoist that Brahma into the covered wagon. I hands Sheepeye my pony's reins, an' drives the mules back into the clearin'. Buckskin stays behind.

Inside the clearin', Flanagan an' the Hindoos is waitin'. The hombres has carried their sick pardner out in the open, an' are kneelin' beside him an' wailin' an' jabberin'. An' that ring o' tall green prickly-pear ain't hardly high enough to hold Tinhorn Flanagan, who's gone on a reg'lar buckin' spree in his impatience to hit the trail pronto.

He howls peevish: "I tell yuh, gents, my patience is plumb give away! I got to git a move on! I'm tired o' foolin' with these locoed furriners. What in hell has kep' you fellers so long, anyways?"

"We been ketchin' this Brahma," shoots back Sheepeye. "An' now, we're r'arin' to collect that fifty bucks." He yells at me: "Hey, Broncho, drive yore wagon 'round this way!"

I swings them mules around an' backs up into the pile o' Hindoos. The Brahma is hid by the wagon-sheet, but his tail's danglin' out the back end o' the wagon. I stops the mules jest at the right place to leave that tail within reachin' distance o' that sick hombre's hand.

But the gent shakes his bandaged head, an' his five pards shakes theirs too. They look insulted, an' jabber some lingo to Flanagan.

Flanagan throws his hands in the air.

"The durned fools!" he bellers. "I don't fool with 'em no more! They say that, accordin' to their religious customs, the Brahma critter's got to be standin' ereck right beside the dyin' hombre what shakes hands with its tail!"

Sheepeye goggles at him. "Flanagan," says he, dangerous, "us fellers is tired o' foolishment! We want our fifty dollars!"

Flanagan shoots them Hindoos a hard look. He turns to us sudden, an' then says:

He kicks Sheepeye in the stomach.

"Gents," he says, "my mind's made up! You've earned the fifty. But if yuh'll hog-tie them dirty Hindoos, an' throw 'em in the wagon fer me, I'll give yuh a *hundred* dollars!"

"She goes!" whoops Sheepeye prompt. A hundred dollars sounds good to him. Anyways, he's got a grudge against them Hindoos.

"Shall we join in, Broncho?" Nueces Slim asts me.

"Pick yore man!" I says, an' I pick my own.

I gets me a tall skinny Hindoo by the wish-bone, slams him to the dirt, an' hog-ties him. Nueces Slim gets his critter too, first try. An' Sheepeye Riggins, who likes his excitement in quantity, grabs a Hindoo in each hand, sets down on one, lays the other one acrost his lap, an' gets busy with his piggin'-string.

Tin-horn Flanagan yells us sech encouragement as "Treat 'em rough, boys, but don't kill 'em!" An' them Hindoos squawks and scratches an' claws like wildcats. That sick feller gives us the hardest fight. He come to life all of a suddint, an' kicks Sheepeye in the stummick, an' gouges Nueces Slim in the eye, an' claws my face in the only spot that hadn't been scratched by the prickly-pear. But he was crippled in one leg, an' it ended up with Sheepeye settin' down on his head, while me an' Nueces Slim tied him down.

Well, we piled our six captives in a row on the ground, an' unloaded that Brahma critter from the wagon. Flanagan cheers us by allowin' the hundred dollars'll soon be ours.

"Let's stack 'em in, boys!" yells Sheepeye.

He grabs a Hindoo by the feet, an' we helps him lift the hombre into the wagon. We does the others likewise. When they're stacked three-deep, with the sick feller in a honorary position at the top o' the pile, Sheepeye turns expectant.

"All right, Flanagan," says he. "Where's the hundred?"

"Here you are," answers Flanagan, in a changed voice. "Up with them hands!"

He's got two Colt's .45's pointin' at us! There's a hard glitter in his eyes, an' it means "No foolin'!" We shore knows that.

"Yuh pore fools!" he sneers. "Did yuh think I'd actually make yuh a present o' a hundred bucks? Keep them hands up! Turn around!"

He slips up behind us, an' unbuckles our belts, jest like them J-F cowboys had done.

"Belly down!" he commands.

"Yuh yaller-livered snake!" chokes Sheepeye. "What's yore game?"

Flanagan bats him over the ear with one o' the .45's.

"Shet up!" says he. "Belly down an' stretch yore arms straight ahead on the ground!"

We all flattens ourselves, like he tells us.

"It's my turn to do a little hog-tyin'," he says, an' I feel a noose cut into my ankles. "You stacked the Hindoos in the wagon. I'll jest stack you in that shack!"

Which he starts to do pronto! He ties my hands acrost my back, an' likewise puts the ropes on Nueces Slim an' Sheepeye. He grabs my collar, an' starts to drag me to the shack.

Well, it shore looks like me an' Nueces Slim an' Sheepeye has done sold ourselves a heap o' trouble when we started workin' for Tin-horn Flanagan. I can't savvy jest what his game is. I sorter believe he's locoed, him an' them Hindoos an' them crazy reeligious customs that includes shakin' hands with a Brahma cow's tail. Ol' Buckskin Bones had warned us that Flanagan was crooked. It looks like it'd 'a' paid us to listen some to that warnin'.

At the door o' the shack, Flanagan slacks on my collar while he takes a peek inside.

"Bless my stack o' chips!" he laughs. "They's a big live rattlesnake coiled jest inside the door! I wonder what'd happen if I throwed you on top of him!"

He grabs my collar again. I feel myself bein' raised for a toss.

Suddint, there's a *bang!* It's a *bang* that I'd know anywhere. It's like a ton o' dynamite at the height o' its glory.

Flanagan's grip loosens on my collar. He spins around. He drops the .45 he's carryin' in his right hand.

"Doo-ee be good now, ye varmint!" says Buckskin Bones, steppin' out o' the edge o' the prickly-pear with his smokin' Frontier six-gun.

Right at Buckskin's heels comes that trim, spry, six-foot gent that he's been talkin' to jest outside the thicket, when me an' Sheepeye and Nueces Slim had brung that runty white J-F steer in off'n the range. This feller steps over to Flanagan an' snaps a pair o' handcuffs on his wrists.

"I got you this time, Tin-horn!" he says.

Buckskin cuts us boys loose with his Bowie knife. Sheepeye, who's mortified a heap to be found tied up this-a-way, goes slidin' over to the six-foot gent.

"Say, stranger," he blurts, "who in hell are yuh, anyways? We'd done figgered yuh was the owner o' that J-F brand. But I reckoned we figgered wrong!"

"My name's Hendrix," says the six-foot gent. "I'm an immigration officer for the United States govermint. For two years, Tin-horn Flanagan's been helpin' Hindoos an' Chinks make unlawful entry from Mexico into the United States. This is the first time I've ever been able to ketch him," he says. "He wades the hombres acrost the Rio Grande an' freights 'em to the nearest railroad. Gets five hundred dollars a head on delivery at Kansas City. I had a little brush with this outfit last night, down along the river, but they got away in the dark. Bones here tells me I wounded one o' the hombres in the leg."

"Uh-huh!" gulps Sheepeye. He whirls on Buckskin, an' says: "Yuh knowed about this all the time! How Come?"

"Tellyphone," answers the ol' long-hair, bitin' his plug. "Didn't I tell ye hit was a vallyable instrumint? Hendrix tellyphoned to Faro Town this mornin' tryin' to find out ef anybody had seed them Hindagoes. I tells him the news ye had brung about Flanagan's outfit. When he got hyar, I persuaded him to hold off the arrest fer a little. I wanted you boys to 'arn thet fifty dollars off'n Flanagan ef ye could. We've been layin' low in that prickly-pear. Hendrix has promised me a fifty dollar ree-ward fer helpin' capture Flanagan."

I hear Sheepeye whisper a word, hopeful. It sounds like "Grub!"

"Naw," says Buckskin. "I'm goin' to pay my tellyphone dues with hit. What do you gents need with grub now? Ain't ye got thet Brahma slick thar to feed fat on? Ye kin have all but the tail," says he. "We'll save the tail, an' send hit to the Vinegaron jail—for Tin-horn Flanagan, who deals in Hindagoes."

Yuh jest can't hardly get ahead o' Buckskin Bones!

(*What have you to say about this story?* See Page 168.)

THE COLOR OF HORSES

THE question as to whether one can tell the good or bad qualities of a horse by its color will probably never be settled on the range. Some riders prefer horses of one color, some of another. As far as the writer can learn, there are only three colors with their variations that can be said to actually affect the efficiency of an animal. These are white, "pinto" and "buckskin." A white horse, "chalk white," is a horse that is likely to suffer from constitutional weaknesses as a result of interbreeding, according to the Handbook for Rangers and Woodsmen, while a "pinto" (also known as "paint," "piebald" or "calico") is a descendant of the Indian ponies, and while they are very strong and hardy, they never attain great size. The buckskin, or "claybank," or "dun" is universally noted for its tremendous endurance. The buckskin showing dark stripes about its legs above or below the knees and hock joints, or along its spinal column, are particularly endowed with great powers of endurance. They are descendants from a distinct breed of Spanish ponies. Black horses are said to suffer most from heat, bays are generally supposed to be the most vicious, and chestnuts are said to be the tenderest of skin and most easily injured.

The rarest and most intelligent animal of all is the beautiful cream-colored (not white) horse that so frequently composes the troups of performing horses often seen in circuses. They are in no way related to the "chalk whites," but are a distinct breed of highly intelligent animals.

"What yuh goin' tuh do with this colt?"

IVORY, THE HORSE OF HORSES

A COMPLETE COWBOY NOVELETTE

By Glenn A. Connor

Illustrated by H. MELOY

A young cowboy fights for his horse against the odds of being branded horse-thief.

THERE was a time and day in the West when horseflesh was valued above human life. A man might go free with murder upon his soul, a man might go his way unpunished after stealing another's gold, but a man that stole another's horse—never! He was hounded to earth and made to pay the penalty of his crime. And that penalty was death!

Such punishment as was meted out seems terrible. It was terrible; but justified. For remember, a horse carried his master to safety in times of danger; he carried him through battles when human friends deserted his side; through blizzards that no man could battle alone; over mountain fastnesses and across waterless desert wastes where dangers assailed upon every side. They spent man's lonely watches with him; starved when he starved; suffered when he suffered; always loyal, always true to their trust, and willing to sacrifice their last remaining ounce of strength at their master's mere word.

No wonder "horse-thief" became the most hated and obnoxious name in all the West! We find that term the most despicable name in the West to-day, even though his punishment is no longer meted out at the end of a rope.

And so we come to that tale I would make bold to tell you, the tale of that horse of horses and of the one horse-thief that was never caught—Luke Justine, a mere lad, who sacrificed his prospect for a future, for his one great love.

Ivory they called him, a name derived from his pure white coloring, and a horse endowed with more than intelligence.

We cannot properly speak of Luke Justine as a horse-thief. Ivory truly belonged to Justine, the boy having raised him from a suckling colt. Yet in the eyes of the law, such law as then existed in the West, Justine was looked upon by that hated name. And herein lies the story.

CHAPTER I

LUKE JUSTINE, a lad of sixteen, and his boss, Duke Moore, topped the last rise that put them in sight of Stony River, where two miles above it burst from the rock-congested depths of Cedar Bluffs in a sea of white foam, to wend its way a short distance across the gray sage flats, only to disappear into the fastnesses of the Tornado Hills.

"A man could hide in these hills forever an' never get caught; I swear he could," mused Moore. Because he little dreamed he would ever have occasion to hide out in any such manner, Justine showed little interest in the other's spoken thought. His attention became centered on a small moving object below, and another larger and lighter colored object that did not move. He stiffened in his saddle as a gray form stepped boldly from the underbrush that hemmed the river bank and advanced circling upon the little black object.

Young Justine swung from his saddle and slipped his rifle from its scabbard, all in the same motion. The next instant he was kneeling at his horse's head with the rifle stock pressed against his cheek. Not until the sharp crack of the rifle awoke him from his reverie did Moore come to a realization of his young companion's actions. He looked up in time to see a gray form spring into the air, then strike the ground with legs jerking convulsively. The rifle cracked a second time; and a gray form, following the first, started dragging his useless hind quarters back toward the brush. A third shot and he rolled over and lay still.

"Good shootin', kid," grunted Moore gruffly. "That's a full quarter of a mile down there, an' gray wolves ain't no easy target."

Justine fondled his gun with pride. "She's a plumb good gun, Mr. Moore," he said simply. Then calling his boss's attention to the two objects below, he said somewhat excitedly, "Looks like they downed a mare, sir. I bet that's her colt rantin' 'round, poor little tike."

"We'll ride down an' see," said Moore. But upon arriving at the scene, their courses diverted. The boy rode over to the mare. Moore directed his attention to the wolves.

"She's been hamstrung," called young Luke. "I reckon they come back tuh get th' colt."

Moore was examining the second of the wolves. He turned to regard the boy with new respect. "Clipped this one first time 'cross th' backbone just in front of th' hips. Th' second shot got 'im smack b'low th' butt of th' ear. That first one got th' heart plumb center. I claim that's some shootin'!" he muttered to himself. Aloud to Justine, "Say, kid, where'd yuh ever learn tuh shoot like that?"

Young Justine's attention was fastened upon the long legged, ungainly colt who was returning his look with interest a short distance away. His reply was rather abstracted. "Good gun—good ammunition —practice on movin' targets. Say, Mr. Moore, what yuh goin' tuh do with this colt?" he demanded anxiously, adding by way of information, "This mare is yours."

The little fellow turned his eyes in Moore's direction, and his ears shot forward as though he meant to learn his sentence first hand. "Shoot 'im," grunted Moore, after walking over to the dead mare and seeing it was beyond doubt his. As if he understood the ominous words, the colt whirled and started running up the slope.

"There's a good movin' target for yuh," chuckled the owner. "Shoot!"

"No!" Young Luke shook his head decidedly. "Yuh sha'n't kill him!" he exclaimed defiantly.

Moore looked at him in surprise. "But that's better'n lettin' th' poor little devil starve tuh death," he protested.

"He ain't goin' to starve!" Justine's eyes followed the colt's erratic course up the slope. "I'll carry him intuh th' ranch."

"Carry him?" ejaculated Moore. "Why kid, it's all of twenty miles to th' ranch!"

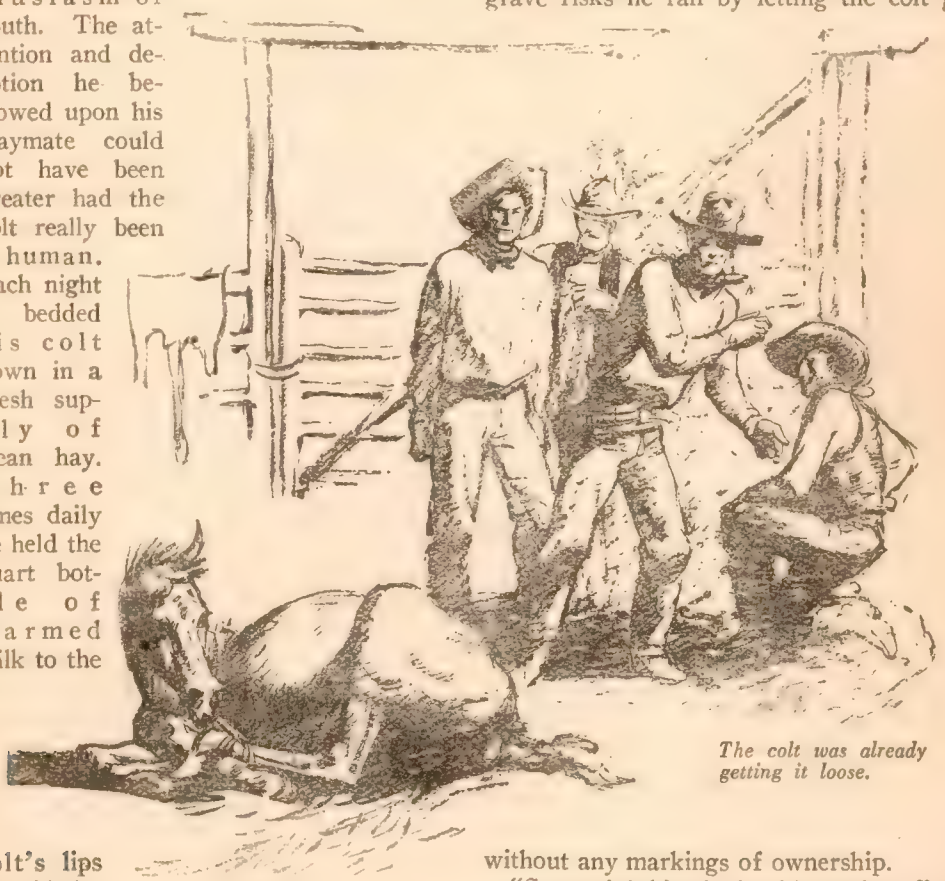
"I don't care if it's a hundred, I'll take him in," declared the boy stubbornly.

"All right," Duke finally granted. "You pack him in an' he's yuhr hoss." And so, young Justine came into possession of Ivory.

In the months that followed the wolf incident, the little colt that Justine had packed all that distance to the ranch had become so attached to his young master as to cause comment by all who witnessed his demonstrations. He would tag at Justine's heels like a faithful dog; would come from a great distance at his master's whistle, with a clatter of little hoofs and a shrill whinny that expressed his delight; and he

learned a category of tricks under Justine's tireless tutorship, that both pleased and astounded his audience.

If the colt became attached to his master, his love was no greater than that shown by the boy. The change worked in Justine was marvelous. Where he had formerly been moody and taciturn, far beyond his years, he now showed all the joy and enthusiasm of youth. The attention and devotion he bestowed upon his playmate could not have been greater had the colt really been a human. Each night he bedded his colt down in a fresh supply of clean hay. Three times daily he held the quart bottle of warmed milk to the colt's lips until he had drunk his fill; then he would give the shaggy coat a vigorous rub down until it lay smooth and glossy. The colt thrived and grew by leaps and bounds. His little ribs were no longer visible, and his knotty legs showed signs of developing muscles smooth and symmetrical.



The colt was already getting it loose.

So far Justine had not hit upon a name that suited his fastidious taste. Usually when he spoke of the colt, it was as "my little pal" or "my baby hoss."

The next two events, that have a direct bearing upon this tale, came to pass some six months later, and happened but a few days apart. The first was the colt's introduction to a branding iron. Justine protested vigorously against the suggestion that his "little pal" should be subjected to even this momentary torture. But Moore over-ruled his objection by pointing out the grave risks he ran by letting the colt go without any markings of ownership.

"Supposin' th' colt should wander off, or somebody chased him off an' slapped their own brand on him; how yuh goin' tuh prove he's yuhrs?"

Justine had no more to say. He ordered the colt to lie down as he had formerly been taught to do, and with his own hands bound the colt's feet. Then he turned hastily away and beat a hasty retreat to the bunkhouse, unable to bear even this slight pain inflicted upon his beloved pal.

The colt raised his head, his eyes bright with understanding and anticipation. He

suspected right off what his young master expected of him. They had played this game before, with the difference his playfellow had bound his own hands or feet, then left the solving of the untangling of those knots for him.

It had taken the colt long, weary hours to learn the art. Justine's patience had been no greater than his own. And as he learned the complications step by step, he had not forgotten. Now his crafty little teeth could set into a knot and undo it with almost the same ability as human hands.

Duke Moore was first to note the colt's actions. "Well, I'll be horn-swoggled! Look at that, won't yuh?" he exclaimed in amazement.

The riders stared. The colt had clamped his teeth on the first of those knots, and was already getting it loose.

"Fall on 'im quick 'fore he gets away!" roared Duke, starting forward.

MacDonald, the big Scotch foreman, pounced upon the colt's head and flattened it upon the ground. The colt gave a surprised whicker and tried to struggle to his feet. But the big bulk of the foreman upon his neck was too much for his puny strength. He subsided with a look of reproach at the foreman, and probably wondered in his colt mind what this sudden unwarranted attack meant.

Then came the touch of the hot iron upon his tender skin. He stiffened with a jerk, his eyes rolled back into his head until only the whites showed, and something like a low moan issued between his tightly set teeth. It was the first time he had felt pain since his mind had grown capable of registering sensations. He wondered dumbly at its meaning.

Justine came dashing back into the corral as the hot iron was removed from the colt's quivering shoulder. With fierce hands he tore the fetters from the colt's feet. With the same impetuosity he bowled the big Scotsman from his perch. Then he flung himself beside the colt, took his head tenderly up in his arms and started talking to it after the manner of a grief-stricken mother to an injured child.

The colt's eyes resumed their natural position. He looked up at his young master, a smoke haze obscuring their usual clear depths. Was that reproach he saw in them? Justine recoiled as from a stab in the heart. Then he bent forward and laid his hot cheek against the cool velvet muzzle of the colt.

"It was treachery, baby hoss, but it wasn't my fault!" he cried bitterly. As though that explained the mystery, the colt's lips quivered with a soft whinny.

Duke Moore and his riders looked on in wondering silence. If they saw anything amusing in the scene, their faces failed to crack a smile. Instead, there was an unaccustomed look of compassion. Moore, whose features were naturally hard and stern, had taken on a sudden softening, a relenting to some finer feeling. There was a choke in his voice as he turned to walk away.

"Come on, boys, we'll start them yearlin's driftin' for their summer range," he said brusquely.

CHAPTER II

DUKE MOORE'S motives were usually well intended, as when he insisted Justine's colt be branded. Justine, of course, had no brand of his own, so it naturally followed that the outfit's own brand should be placed upon the colt. There is where he sealed young Justine's fate.

Moore was as far-sighted as any of the men of those days. He probably realized the day was not distant when a man would have to show his ownership of a horse, bearing other than his own brand, by a correctly drawn bill of sale. He might have even considered giving the boy such a paper; but if so, the pressing business at hand made him temporarily forget.

Be that as it may, Moore neglected this duty. A busy man has little time to consider the uncertainties of life. And yet tragedy followed hard upon the heels of the ranchman. Three days later, Moore became the victim of an Indian ambuscade.

Moore's heirs lived in the East, and it turned out that none of them possessed the stern qualities of this hardy old ranchman. They had heard many wild tales of this savage West, and decided a bird in

nand was worth two in the bush. They sold out to an Eastern syndicate.

The syndicate was contented to let the outfit run on its old basis for the first year after Moore's death, Moore's Scotch foreman in charge. But those first year's profits were so altogether unsatisfying that the syndicate decided upon a more personal interest.

John Pliny, president of the syndicate, looked upon their decision as a glorious opportunity for his son, Richard, who had just graduated from college. Of course, the boy knew nothing of ranching, but he had his sheepskin for book learning and was thereby qualified to learn quickly. Maybe he would never learn to ride a bucking horse, but he was most adept at figures, and that was the type of man they wanted now.

As Richard prepared to board the train that would take him to this new field of adventures, his father added a last word of warning: "These Westerners are hard characters, son, and to get along with them you've got to treat 'em the same way. Treat 'em harsh, Richard. Show 'em we raise firm characters in the East, too."

Young Pliny arrived at his destination with a general idea of his responsibilities; and he was considerably puffed up with his importance. A number of cowboys had congregated on the cindered platform when Pliny descended from his train. Pliny eyed them with a stony stare. Of course, these were his cowboys, and he must teach them their place right off the reel. He had a faint idea that this ranch owned by the syndicate was the only ranch in the vicinity.

"Here, my good man," he called to one of the gaping riders, "pick up these grips and take me to the nearest hotel."

The cowboy thus addressed gasped. But when his companions turned their grinning countenances toward him, his incredulity became replaced by a black scowl. He took a quick, threatening step forward.

"Say, little 'un," he growled, "yuh don't look like *you* was paralyzed or nothin'. What's th' matter with yuh packin' yuhr own grips?"

Pliny flushed and paled. These Westerners certainly were hard characters. Then the memory of his father's last words came to reassure him. Of course these men did not know who he was. When they learned his identity. . . .

"I am Richard Pliny, general manager of the—the . . ." (What in hades was that ranch called?) Pliny floundered helplessly, his manner growing more embarrassed every minute.

"Maybe yuh're general manager of th' Mohave Desert Real Estate Company," suggested one of the grinning cowboys. His sally was greeted with an hilarious shout of mirth.

Pliny glared at them impotently. "The —the—old Moore ranch," he finished lamely.

Luke Justine shoved his way through the suddenly interested audience. "If yuh're Pliny, I reckon yuh're th' tenderfoot ol' Mac sent me in after," he said, sizing the other up with a frank look of distaste. Then his face flushed with shame as he thought what these others must think of their new manager. "Give me yuhr trunk checks," he ordered shortly. Pliny obeyed in something of a daze. "Now take yuhr suitcases an' throw 'em in that buckboard at yonder end of th' platform. Soon as I get yuhr trunks we'll hit th' trail," he added sharply, turning at once toward the baggage room.

Pliny came to a realization of his position with a start. "Here, boy!" He grasped Luke by the shoulder and swung him roughly about. "Take these grips and put them in that buckboard. *Then* you may get my trunks."

Justine let his eyes wander up and down the big athletic figure of the Easterner with insulting coolness. "Say," he exclaimed, "I ain't no bell hop! If yuh want them grips, put 'em in yuhrself." And wrenching loose from the grip, he strode indignantly away, a low murmur of approval following his act.

Pliny's face turned purple with rage as he took a threatening step in the direction of Justine. But a movement in the crowd caused him to pause. He eyed the hands hovering over six-shooter butts with so evident meaning that his face again went

white. With a muttered threat of what he would do to the young upstart when he got him alone, he jerked up his suitcases and hurried toward the buckboard.

On that forty-mile drive to the ranch, Pliny, no doubt, would have tried to mete out the punishment he felt the boy so distinctly deserved, had not an incident occurred shortly after they left the railroad station, that made him think twice before carrying out his intentions. The team of tough little mustangs Justine was driving was high-spirited and cagey. They were cutting down the trail at a merry clip when a rattlesnake, coiled in the middle of the road, sounded his warning buzz. The little mustangs changed their course in a series of side plunges that threatened to overturn the light rig. Justine's six-shooter flashed into his hand while the rig was still upon its erratic course. There was a single deafening explosion, the gun slid back into its holster, and Justine again had his lines in both hands in order to control them after this second fright. Pliny looked back in time to see the headless body of the snake weaving crazily above its coils.

Pliny paled as he considered how disastrous his intentions might have ended for himself. He had small doubt this wild youth would have shot him with as little hesitation had he forced the issue.

That long drive was covered for the most part in silence. Pliny made no pretense at conversation. He stared straight ahead in sullen silence; bitter resentment at this boy, whom inwardly he feared and hated, gnawing at his vitals. It likewise occurred to him his position here was not to be so envied as he at first imagined. This show of disrespect and lack of recognition already accorded him was a new and demoralizing experience for which he was in no way prepared. And because he knew nothing of the code of the West nor its rulings, he laid the blame of his humiliation wholly at the door of Justine.

Justine's own feelings were demonstrated when he drew his weary team to a halt before the ranch house. All the way home he had pondered the situation so that now as he flung his lines aside and sprang from the rig, his mind was made up as to just what he would do. As MacDonald, the foreman, appeared in the doorway of the ranch house, Justine faced him with blazing eyes.

"Mac, it's a dirty trick they played on us!" he exclaimed indignantly. "Look what they sent out here tuh take yuhr place. I brought it out, but damned if I'll work for it. Mac, I'm through!"

The Scotsman made no reply; just gazed long and questioningly at the boy. Then he turned his eyes to the figure still in the buckboard. Pliny was stiff and sore from the rough, jolting, unaccustomed ride, and Justine's words did not tend to sweeten his already sadly taxed temper. He glowered upon the two with ill-concealed contempt and anger. MacDonald returned his scowl with interest.

Then he turned back to the boy and asked purposely loud, "Wasn't aimin' tuh pull stakes tuh-night, was yuh, Luke?"

"I was," said Justine, giving the foreman a questioning look.

"Stick 'til mornin'," he ordered gruffly. "Most likely I'll be travelin' with yuh."

CHAPTER III

HAD Justine followed his intentions to leave that night, probably he would have escaped the plague that pursued him through several years of his life. But Justine little dreamed of the bitter experience awaiting him on the morrow, and the idea of being a companion to the old Scotsman had an appeal he had no desire to resist.

The sun was just peeking over the distant blue hills that marked the Cedar Bluffs, when the old Scotsman appeared in the doorway of the ranch house. Justine already had their horses saddled and their few personal belongings tied on behind their cantles.

Tied to the tail of his mount was the colt Moore had given him, now nearly two years old. The colt's black coat had long since turned a pronounced gray with a promise of going to snow whiteness in the future. Already there were splotches of white upon him without the least semblance of a dark hair among them. In stature, symmetrical muscles, and intelligence he already showed an advantage far above the usual run of even his kind. He was

one to attract the attention and admiration of even a novice.

There was a black scowl upon the Scotsman's features as he approached. His troubled eyes went to the colt tied to the horse's tail, and he grumbled something under his breath. Either Justine did not notice the Scotsman's emotion, or else he was too anxious to be going to remark upon it.

As the two started to ride out of the ranch yard, Pliny appeared in the doorway and hailed them.

"Kid, yuh're in for it I guess," muttered MacDonald. "We ain't got no bill o' sale for these hosses. I had tuh pay Pliny again for mine 'cause I didn't have no papers tuh show I owned him. Just pure damn oneryness in him. Acts like he's peeved 'bout something. Reckon he's comin' tuh quizz you now."

The Scotsman's suspicions proved correct. Pliny stopped a few feet away, his eyes trained upon Justine's two horses. "I see these two animals bear the syndicate's brand, Justine. I suppose you have papers to prove you own them?" There was a triumphant, vindicative gleam in the Easterner's eyes as he looked up at the boy.

Justine's eyes closed to mere slits as he gazed upon Pliny's bland smile. He knew the Easterner's motive, and hot anger welled up in him. His hand dropped instinctively to the butt of the gun at his side, only to have it knocked aside by MacDonald. Pliny saw the movement and smiled broadly. "MacDonald has sense if the kid hasn't," he thought to himself, and considered himself well within the bounds of safety.

"None o' that, kid," muttered MacDonald in Justine's ear. "Buy 'em. It's yuhr only way out."

Justine kicked out with his spurred boot.

"How much yuh want for th' colt?" demanded Luke sullenly.

"Fifty dollars for the horse you are riding," stated Pliny.

"I asked yuh how much yuh wanted for th' colt?" repeated Luke unwisely.

Pliny's eyes narrowed as he turned his attention to the colt. Why did the boy insist upon buying the colt first, was the thought that raced through the Easterner's mind. And because he hated the boy so, the answer came like a flash out of a clear sky. He made no effort to conceal the exultation that leaped to his eyes. "Looks like the makings of a likely steed," he smiled.

"How much yuh want for him?" insisted Luke doggedly.

"He's not for sale!" snapped Pliny coldly.

"I'll give yuh all I got," pleaded the boy, his last atom of antagonism gone. He was now pleading for his dearest possession in the world. "Please, Mr. Pliny, let me buy him!"

Pliny shook his head decidedly, all the more determined to keep the colt, now he knew how highly Justine prized him. Now he would make the boy suffer for some of the humiliation he had caused *him*.

"Say, Pliny," broke in the old Scotsman harshly, "I happen tuh know Moore give that colt to th' kid. Luke packed him in a hoss-back from 'way over on th' Stony an' raised him on a bottle 'til th' colt got old enough tuh shift for himself. He's been teachin' that colt all kinds of tricks ever since. Right now he'll out-class some circus hosses. He comes at th' kid's whistle an' 'll go through them tricks at th' raise of his hand. They're pals! By rights th' colt b'longs tuh him. Ain't yuh goin' tuh let him have 'im?"

"I am not," snapped Pliny with finality. "MacDonald, we went over this matter this morning. I told you then anything bearing the syndicate's brand should not leave this ranch until papers were shown that proved beyond a doubt the syndicate no longer owned said property. Justine is unable to show any such papers and I refuse to sell the colt. So that, gentlemen, ends the argument." And before Justine realized his purpose, Pliny stepped forward and slashed the rope that held the colt.

With the scream of a wounded beast, Justine kicked out with his spurred boot, catching Pliny full upon the cheek bone with the sharp rowel. Pliny reeled backwards, clapping his hand to his face where the cheek bone lay exposed. Justine was horrified as he saw the blood spurting between the injured man's fingers. Then Pliny toppled to the ground, where he lay moaning and writhing with the agony of his wound.

When he saw Pliny topple to the ground, Justine became terror-stricken. Clapping spurs to his horse, he fled wildly for the hills. And in his wake, unknown to him, followed the colt, gradually losing ground but sticking loyally to the trail of his young master.

MacDonald watched the youth until he disappeared over the first of the abrupt rising hills; his eyes were a smouldering flame of gladness and doubt. Then he dismounted, picked up the burly form of the tenderfoot, and packed him into the ranch house. After giving him what rough medical treatment the ranch had to offer, MacDonald retired to the desk and did some rapid writing. After giving what he had written a hasty perusual, he walked over to the bunk where Pliny lay outstretched and shoved the paper and a pen into his hand.

"Here's a bill o' sale for that other hoss," said MacDonald sharply, "an' here's yuhr fifty dollars. Just put yuhr John Henry on it."

With the old Scotsman's assistance, Pliny managed to raise up. His eyes burned upon MacDonald with an undying hatred. "I'll have that kid's life for this!" he grated viciously.

"Shut up an' sign this paper," ordered MacDonald harshly. "What th' kid done tuh yuh was brought on by yuhrself."

Pliny cast the pen from him with a curse. "I won't sign it," he screamed, beside himself with pain and rage. "Tell that little cur to bring that horse back or I'll have him pulled for a horse-thief!"

MacDonald took a threatening step forward. "Yuh will not," he growled, shak-

ing his fist under the Easterner's nose. "Yuh got a pen there in yuhr pocket. Get busy an' sign that paper, or what th' kid done to yuh won't hold a candle 'longside of what I'll do to yuh!"

Pliny hesitated no longer. At heart he was a craven coward, and MacDonald's threatening attitude proved a more than sufficient incentive. With fingers that bungled in their haste, he snatched his pen from his pocket and attached his signature at the bottom of the sheet without bothering to read its contents.

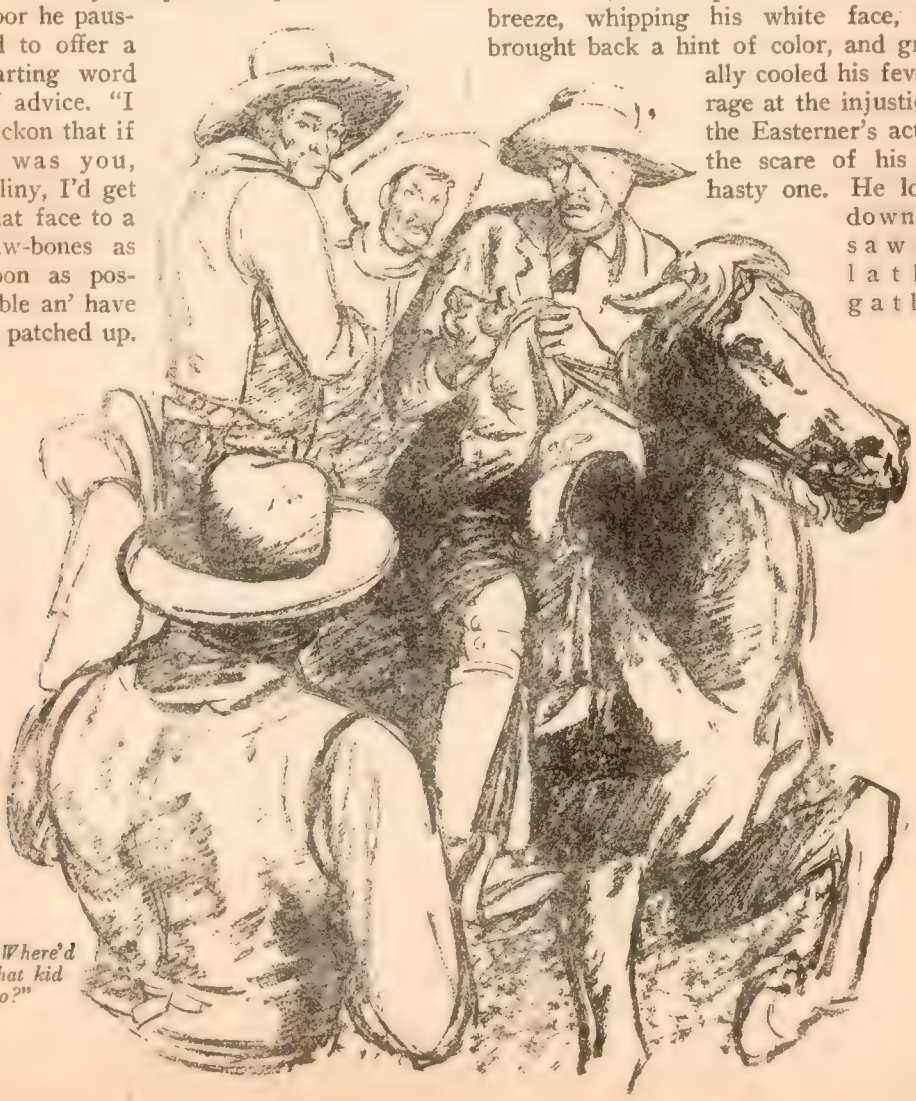
MacDonald folded the paper and stowed it carefully away in his pocket. At the door he paused to offer a parting word of advice. "I reckon that if I was you, Pliny, I'd get that face to a saw-bones as soon as possible an' have it patched up. Yuh'll be lucky if th' kid ain't put his brand on yuh for life."

The look of venom that Pliny sent after MacDonald as he swung through the doorway, boded ill for the one that was responsible for that wound which promised to mar his features for life.

"I'll get him!" vowed Pliny, leaping to his feet and striding rapidly back and forth across the room. "I'll get him if it takes every cent the governor's got!"

CHAPTER IV

THOSE first few miles Justine covered at a furious pace. But the sharp breeze, whipping his white face, soon brought back a hint of color, and gradually cooled his fever of rage at the injustice of the Easterner's act and the scare of his own hasty one. He looked down and saw the lather gather-



"Where'd that kid go?"

C. S.

ing upon his mount's neck and shoulders. The sight helped to steady the boy. With an exclamation of pity, he drew his horse down to a walk.

Looking back over his shoulder to ascertain if he were pursued, he was amazed to see the colt just topping the ridge. This was his first intimation that the colt was following him. With a cry of joy, he swung to the ground, running forward with arms held out in welcome, a dry sob of thanksgiving choking in his throat.

The colt plodded along in a way that told he had already grown weary of the unaccustomed gait. He knew something was radically wrong, and his little mind struggled with a dread thought. Did his young master intend to desert him?

But if his eyes were fastened upon the rough ground the better to choose the most secure footing for his weary legs, his ears still retained their acuteness. The boy's exclamation burst upon his hearing with the thrill of sweet music. He looked up quickly and saw the arms stretched out to him in welcome. With a shrill whinny that defied aching muscles, he tore down the slope at breakneck speed. His hoofs planted themselves in the tough turf as he drew near his master, plowing miniature furrows. Then another whinny of satisfaction and content as Justine's arms went about his neck and the boy whispered words of joy and praise in his ear.

Justine sank to the ground. The colt settled down beside him as he had been taught to do, and pillowed his head upon the boy's lap. Thus MacDonald found them two hours later, the colt's head resting upon the boy's lap, the boy's face buried in the colt's silver mane, both utterly oblivious to their surroundings.

The picture proved too much for the stern old Scotsman. A blur came before his eyes, which he shamefacedly tried to wipe away. A bitter curse ripped from his lips as he considered the injustice of Pliny's act, thus brought so poignantly back to his memory. An almost irresistible temptation to help this youth escape with his treasure assailed him. The colt rightfully belonged to him!

MacDonald's Scotch obstinateness returned. The boy must not be branded a horse-thief. He had a duty to perform that would wring young Justine's very heartstrings as well as his own; but for the boy's sake he must do it. With reluctant steps he approached, his features set hard and unyielding. He reached forward and shook the boy's shoulder with a rough hand.

Justine looked up with a start. From his face had fled every vestige of color. But when he recognized MacDonald, a relieved grin wreathed his lips. There was such joy and contentment in the grin that MacDonald's conscience again smote him. And because the task before him was so distasteful, his attitude toward the boy became one that was much more harsh and unrelenting.

Justine saw the frosty look in the old Scotsman's eyes, and the grin faded from his lips. His face again went pale with doubts and misgivings. "Mac," he commenced pleadingly.

MacDonald halted him with an imperious gesture. "Kid, get that colt back to th' ranch right now. If yuh don't, Pliny is goin' tuh brand yuh a hoss-thief!"

Justine stared with bloodless lips. "Mac," he choked.

"There'll be no argyin' about it," roared the Scotsman.

"I won't!" Justine sprang to his feet, the color rushing back into his face. He faced the other defiantly, his eyes flaming with sudden spirit. "I won't, Mac. That colt is mine an' I mean tuh keep him! Let Pliny brand me a hoss-thief! Who cares!"

"Yuh'll hang! Yuh know what they do tuh hoss-thieves in this country!"

"Don't care if I do! I won't give him up!"

MacDonald looked nonplussed. What could he do against such a stand? "See here, Luke!" he finally exclaimed. "If you don't realize th' penalty of yuhr act, I do. I'm goin' tuh take that colt back if you don't." And he stepped forward as if to carry out his threat.

"You will not!"

MacDonald stopped abruptly. To his amazement, he found himself staring at

the bore of Justine's six-shooter, held steadily. The Scotsman's attention shifted to the cold eyes behind the gun, eyes that now were glazed with the hardness of immutable determination. If he doubted the boy's nerve to shoot, he thought so no longer after his first glance at Justine.

"You will not!" repeated the boy, softly, ominously.

MacDonald raised his hands as he backed slowly away. Then his hands dropped down and he shook his huge, frowsy head sorrowfully. "I—I'm sorry, Luke. I thought — we might be — partners. But I guess this ends it. I can't associate with—a hoss-thief!" The Scotsman hated to say these words.

"Yes, I'm a hoss-thief, Mac," cried Justine bitterly. "A hoss-thief 'cause I steal my own hoss! But we'll let it stand that way. That colt means more tuh me than any livin' human. I never had any dad an' maw that I c'n remember. Tod Hamley found me out on th' desert—just a little shaver. Tod was called a badman an' a killer, but he done th' best he could for me 'fore they finally got him, an' I found him a damn sight more human than some I've met recent.

"He taught me tuh shoot, he taught me tuh ride, he taught me tuh take care of myself. An' last thing he said 'fore he died was, 'Luke, don't yuh let nary man run a whizzer on yuh. Any man as will pick on a defenseless kid is too low tuh live. Don't hesitate tuh pick 'em, kid, yuh're only killin' skunks.'

"Then I drifted tuh Duke. Duke was good tuh me but he didn't have th' savvy Tod did. Tod used tuh show me things an' play with me. After I come here I didn't have no one tuh play with or tuh take a int'rest in me 'til Duke give me this colt. He's th' first playmate I've had since Tod died.

"I'm just a kid yet, Mac, an' I still like tuh play as other kids play. I've filled a man's place, not because I wanted tuh, but because I had tuh. It's been hard, but since I got th' colt, he's helped me tuh bear it. He's th' only one I've struck since Tod that understood an' felt sorry for me. Yuh think I'm goin' tuh give him up as long as there's a breath of life left in my body?"

MacDonald turned quickly away, his shoulders shaking unmistakably. This was the first he had heard anything of the life story of Justine, and its tragedy and pathos struck straight at the great heart of the Scotsman. Had he known before, how much easier he could have made it for the lad! He racked his brain for some way to express his sympathy, his understanding, and to ease the attitude in the boy's heart. So deeply engrossed did he become in the thought that he failed at first to distinguish the sound of drumming hoofs. When they did finally beat in upon his consciousness, it was to look up and find Justine, with the colt dogging his mount's heels, far out across the sagebrush flats.

MacDonald looked after them in indecision. It was upon his lips to shout, when he as suddenly changed his mind. Then commenced a battle with himself. Pity, self-accusation, and admiration for this foolhardy youth struggled for supremacy. Terror and dread tore at his heartstrings for what Justine, a mere child, was bringing upon himself for the sake of a horse. The old Scotsman groaned aloud in his agony of spirit and his inability to cope with the situation.

He watched with tragic eyes until Justine topped the first undulating rise; watched long after the three had disappeared from sight. Then he became aware of a second rapid drumming of hoofs.

MacDonald looked around with a start. He instantly recognized, by the blood-stained bandage about his face, the leading figure as that of Pliny. Immediately in his rear were three other riders whom he as readily recognized.

The old Scotsman sighed with relief. Pliny might continue upon Justine's trail, but these other three would not; not when they heard his side of the tale.

At sight of MacDonald, the three cowboys left Pliny in a cloud of dust and sailed down upon him with wild whoops of joy. "Come on, ol' wolf!" yelled Denny Pierson, dragging his mount to

an earth-plowing halt a scant foot from where the Scotsman stood. "We're trailin' a hoss-thief!"

MacDonald's hand clamped down upon the rider's leg with painful intensity. "Was yuh knowin' who yuh're lookin' for?" he demanded sharply.

"If yuh're meanin' th' thief's name, why, no! We's in such a hell-fired hurry we didn't take time tuh inquire," grinned Denny. "Anyway what difference does th' name make so long's he's a——"

"It may make a heap of difference!" The other two riders crowded in closer to get a better view of Mac's stern face. They had a sudden uneasy feeling that all was not right. Just as they leaned forward over their saddle horns better to catch his words, Pliny burst into their midst.

"Say, you, MacDonald! Where'd that kid go?" he snarled.

MacDonald choked a hot retort with difficulty, and pointed in a direction opposite to that in which the three had disappeared.

"Come on, men," Pliny ordered harshly, whirling his horse and tearing out in the direction indicated, not even looking back to see if the other riders were following him. Had Pliny been in a less excited mood he would surely have suspected MacDonald would send him off on a false hunt. But he struck out without any such suspicion entering his head.

The three riders looked inquiringly at MacDonald. "He didn't tell yuh who th' hoss-thief was then?" Mac queried sharply.

They shook their heads in negation.

"What if I was tuh tell yuh it's Justine?" he pursued, watching them keenly.

"I'd say yuh was a damn liar," grinned Denny frankly. Then in explanation of their presence and their lack of knowledge, he continued: "Yuh see, Mac, me an' Jim an' Sam was bringin' in that count of beef like you ordered. We was somethin' like two miles yet from th' ranch when th' chink cook swoops down on us with a lot of wild jabber which none of us rightly grabs. But we manages tuh interpret somethin' 'bout some new arrival from th' East an' a hoss-thief. Course we starts foggin' ut for th' ranch pronto. Well, this gent that just left us comes tearin' outa th' house like a wild man, an' with that bloody bandage 'bout his face, we thinks maybe there's been somebody killed shore enough. He tells us somethin' more wild 'bout a hoss-thief, which is 'bout as clear as th' chink's chatter. We're wonderin' where you an' th' kid is, an' comes tuh th' conclusion yuh're either out on th' range some place or chasin' th' thief. We asks this clothin' model, an' all he says is, 'Gone!' like he's powerful worked up 'bout it somehow. That's all we know. Now what's this joke yuh're tryin' tuh spring on us 'bout th' kid?"

"It ain't no joke, it's facts." At their looks of disbelief, he said: "I see Pliny ain't burdened yuh none with information, which shows he ain't so green for a tenderfoot after all." Then MacDonald unreeled the whole story to them, emphasizing it with curses that left them no doubts as to his own outraged feelings. "An' that, gents, is yuhr new boss, shipped fresh out o' college tuh run this cow ranch accordin' tuh th' Syndicate's ideas of how a cow outfit should be run," he ended bitterly.

"Th' dirty skunk!" growled Sam.

"Ditto!" ejaculated Jim, not finding it in his vocabulary to express his views.

"Dirty skunk, hell!" snarled Denny, every bit of sunniness gone out of his good-natured face. "Fellahs, that's puttin' it too mild."

"Then you name it," suggested Sam hopefully.

"I can't," admitted Denny regretfully. "But, gents, I'll tell yuh what I'm goin' tuh do. I'm goin' back tuh th' ranch, an' I'm goin' tuh plant myself right there 'til this Pliny party gets back. Then I'm callin' for my time. Damned if I'll work for such a snake another day!"

"Yuh've expressed our views prezactly," approved Jim. "I'm shore for yuh strong on that last suggestion. Cowboys, let's ride!"

After the three riders were gone, MacDonald looked about him uncertainly. He

knew this respite he had given Justine would be only temporary. Other riders would soon take the place of these just departed, riders who had no knowledge or understanding of what led up to the boy's act. They would hunt him down like a coyote and end his existence with as little compunction. For Justine, though only a child in age and spirit, had the size and bearing of a man.

Reaching a sudden decision, MacDonald swung to his saddle and headed his horse toward the place where he had last seen Justine. It was not hard for him to guess where Justine was heading.

CHAPTER V

JUSTINE drew up on almost the identical spot where he and Moore had halted upon that eventful day when he had shot the two wolves and rescued the motherless colt. How strange that the ranchman's words should return so distinctly to him now, when they had been heard almost unconsciously at the time! They came back now with their full portent, their real meaning. It meant sanctity from the law, such law as existed, and security from the human hounds that would dog his trail henceforward.

"A man could hide in these hills forever an' never get caught; I swear he could."

How distinctly he recalled the expression, word for word. It was almost like Moore was by his side now and was repeating his assertion. His eyes wandered in the direction that Moore's had been trained when he expressed his thought aloud. The rugged Cedar Bluffs actually seemed to beckon to him!

Justine exclaimed aloud. Yes, in them he could laugh at fate, laugh at all the pursuit in the world.

He did laugh, with all the joy and thoughtlessnes of youth, little dreaming of the longings of fellow companionship that would be his, of the long, lonely hours he must spend alone in surroundings that would soon grow hateful and dreary, of the pangs of regret and the suffering of mind that is the price of wrongdoing.

Justine rode into that cedar-clad maze of bluffs and canyons with a cheerful whistle upon his lips and the optimism of youth, with no supplies, with no thought of the future, with little thought of the present, other than sealing himself from the eyes of mankind.

MacDonald topped the rim looking down upon Stony River just as the trio were disappearing into the first of the cedar breaks. They were too far away for him to hail them. Quick as the thought struck him, MacDonald wrenched his rifle from the scabbard and fired a series of shots in the air. Without waiting to see their effect, he put his horse down the slope at top speed.

Justine heard the whine of the bullets before the reports reached his ears. He was startled at first, thinking pursuit was already upon his heels. Then common sense told him those shots had not been fired at him; or if they had, the one who had fired them must be a miserable shot. Although the whine of lead had been plainly distinguishable, he knew their course was far wide of him.

Tying his horses out of sight, Justine slipped his rifle from its scabbard and returned to the concealing fringe of scrub timber to learn their import. When he saw MacDonald galloping toward the Bluffs, alone, he stepped boldly into sight, wondering with a quickening of pulse what the presence of the old Scotsman might mean. Fifteen minutes later MacDonald drew his lathered mount up where the boy waited.

"I—I'm sorry, kid. I didn't understand — before," he greeted brokenly. "Shake—an' forgive th' ol' man!"

The boy took a quick step forward, his eyes brightening. "Yuh mean that, Mac? Yuh don't think so dead wrong of me?" he demanded breathlessly.

MacDonald dropped from his saddle and gathered the boy, gun and all, up in his arms. For the first time since the death of Tod Hamley, Justine broke down utterly. The old Scotsman uttered no word; just crushed the sobbing boy to him, patting his shoulder comfortingly. Precious minutes flew by unnoticed by

either. MacDonald's own sight had become blurred, and he failed to notice that the sun was fast casting the bluffs in shadows.

As soon as the boy's sobs had ceased and he lay composed and contented in the big Scotsman's arms, MacDonald said tenderly, "Luke, yuh say yuh never had a paw an' maw that yuh c'n remember. I—I—never had a son, boy, but I'd like tuh have one—just like you. Won't yuh let me be yuhr dad, Luke? Won't yuh?" There was timidness, anxiety, and an unholy desire in the man's hesitant speech.

Justine looked up at the pleading MacDonald in surprise. "Yuh won't make me give up th' colt?" he demanded suspiciously.

"No. No! Yuh jus' go ahead an' keep that little hoss, kid. If they dare try tuh take him away from yuh I'll——"

MacDonald was never allowed to complete his threat. Struggling back to his feet, Justine grasped his hands and nearly yanked the old Scotsman off his feet in his delight. "Will I let yuh be my dad!" he cried. "Why, Mac, I'd rather have you for my paw than any man livin'!"

Then into this spark of sunshine that had come into his life, suddenly sped the shadow of his position. Justine was not without knowledge of the stern code of the West. He knew all too well the penalty of his act. His face grew troubled and thoughtful.

"Mac, you bein' my dad ain't goin' tuh save me. I gotta hide out for th' balance of my life, I reckon." He looked at MacDonald in hopes the shrewd Scotsman had some answer to his problem.

"Yuh're wrong, son," exclaimed MacDonald. "I sort o' got off th' trail comin' in contact with yuh like this. I done got our plans all made. Yuh go on an' hide in these hills. Get back a safe distance from this trail so when yuh shoot it can't be heard. Yuh'll have tuh kill yuhr eats. Got plenty matches for a fire? Well, here take what I got. I'm goin' tuh town tuh get us some supplies. Keep watch for me somewhere 'long this trail tuhmorrow at sundown."

Both had their emotions well under control by this time, and they parted with a mere clasp of hands. MacDonald watched Justine until he got his horses and again had disappeared among the bluffs and scrub cedars. Then he swung up on his own horse. That he had in the neighborhood of a hundred and fifty miles to cover between now and when the sun should set again, did not seem to bother him in the least.

CHAPTER VI

"SAY, Baldy, there goes that damned Scotsman, MacDonald, with another pack of supplies. He's been packing supplies by here like that for over five years now. Claims he's prospecting over in the Cedar Bluffs country."

"Nothin' strange in that, is there?" grunted the little, bald-headed man lazily. "There's a heap o' prospectors all over th' West."

"But nobody ever saw or heard of gold in the Cedar Bluffs," snapped Pliny, a ragged scar below his eye causing that member to jerk peculiarly.

"There's other mineral besides gold," yawned Baldy Blair, as he squirmed deeper into his chair. The two were seated upon the vine-screened veranda of the ranch house. Outside, the sun beat down with terrific force. A quarter of a mile distant wound the white, dusty trail that led up into the Stony River district. Plodding along, his head bowed to the heat, rode a huge, grizzled man, his horse kicking up puffs of dust at every step. At his rear shuffled two other horses, heavily ladened, their packs concealed by coverings of canvas. Baldy viewed the sight through half closed, listless eyes, displaying no other emotion than scorn for a man who was fool enough to travel in such heat.

"These prospectors," he murmured drowsily, "most always wander in peculiar places. Crazy I guess."

"You damn fool, don't you get my drift?" snarled Pliny, impatiently. "He's the man I sent for you to follow. He's Justine's friend, that coyote I been trying to find all these years. Some of my men tracked Justine up into the Cedar

Bluffs but there lost his trail. Trying to find a man up in those hills is about as simple as looking for a needle in a haystack. There's never been hide nor hair seen of him since he left this ranch.

"MacDonald handed out that cock-and-bull story about prospecting a long time ago, but I never did swallow it. All he's ever brought out of there is furs. I've always thought that he was packing this grub up there to Justine, and I still believe it. I've had men follow him, but he either threatens them back or gives them the slip. I undertook to follow him myself once——" Pliny broke off abruptly. It occurred to him he was saying too much. "Get out there on his trail right now," he ordered bluntly.

At Pliny's first words as to who and what MacDonald was, the sleepy look instantly disappeared from Baldy's eyes. But the curious way in which Pliny had so abruptly switched the conversation aroused his interest in another direction.

"What happened when *you* followed him?" he drawled with dry emphasis.

"Nothing, nothing!" denied Pliny hastily, but with an undeniable flush of confusion that further stirred the bald-headed man's desire for knowledge. "I lost him, too, and come back as unsuccessful as the rest."

Blair shrugged his shoulders. He knew Pliny lied, but decided to wait until a more appropriate time to quiz him further. He stared out at the withering grass and the blistering heat, in dismay. Then he rose reluctantly to his feet, yawned and stretched, and retired within the house to prepare himself for the trail. Pliny turned to regard his retreating back with an unsympathetic smile. He suspected how the other hated to expose himself to that suffocating heat. Baldy Blair was no desert man.

CHAPTER VII

WITH a last backward glance, MacDonald plunged his horses into a heavy foliage of willows and young cottonwoods. Man and horses fought their way through this heavy undergrowth for a matter of an hour, when they suddenly came out upon an open space where the soft gurgling of water became audible. This was one of the headwaters of Little Stony. It was back many miles in the rugged fastnesses of the Cedar Bluffs, where Stony River broke from its perpendicular cliffs to burst in continuous rapids of white foam into the Tornado Hills.

MacDonald urged his weary horses into the stream. After they had drunk their fill, he turned them abruptly downstream in the direction whence he had come. For half a mile he followed the course of the creek; then he turned out on the opposite bank. This was his last resort of throwing off any possible pursuit. Ten minutes later he rode into a small clearing. At the extreme edge of the clearing were two small log huts, one of which housed the fugitive. The other was a stable for the horses.

It had already grown dark when MacDonald entered the clearing; so dark, indeed, that the buildings were indistinguishable. But against the black background where the Scotsman knew the buildings stood, he could discern the outlines of a magnificent white horse, a silent sentinel in that black void.

MacDonald exclaimed to himself in awe and admiration. "That Ivory! He's always on th' job." He stopped to see what the horse would do. The thud of his horses' feet had been scarcely audible upon the bed of soft moss that grew among the trees; yet, he saw the white form move forward, and heard the thud of his hoofs striking upon wood. It was Ivory giving his master the danger signal. The Scotsman paused a moment longer to see what would happen.

"Hands up, hombre!" MacDonald stiffened in the saddle with a startled exclamation. He knew that was not Justine's voice. "Careful how yuh move. I got yuh covered," continued the same soft drawling voice. "Now come down off that hoss easy-like."

MacDonald obeyed the command with a sinking of heart. Somehow, some way, somebody had at last trailed him to their lair. The Scotsman was desperate enough

to take a long chance with a snap-shot at the unseen one. But how could he when that low, drawling voice deceived him so in direction? First it appeared back of him, then to one side. . . .

MacDonald felt the hard prod of a six-shooter against his back. His hands raised slowly above his head as low curses dripped from his lips, that he had let his one small chance slip by. "Lead out for yuhr hole," continued the ominous voice softly, "an' don't make any noise."

Before MacDonald could obey, there came the snort of a horse and a rapid trampling of hoofs. Then the cabin door burst open, exposing the dim light within. He caught a fleeting glimpse of Justine's figure as it crossed that lighted space and as quickly disappeared.

"That you, Mac?" called Justine.

Another vicious prod of the gun barrel and a hissed order. "Answer him—an' be careful!"

"It's me, Luke," answered the old Scotsman unsteadily, hoping Justine would suspect something wrong from the nature of his reply.

"Well, come a-runnin'. I've had chow waitin' for an hour," came back the cheerful reply.

MacDonald could scarcely choke his groan of disappointment. He heard the chuckle of satisfaction behind him and was tempted to shout a warning. But the gun barrel poking him in the back caused him to hesitate.

"Lead on!" At the low voiced command, MacDonald again started forward, stumbling along when he knew every little bump and obstacle as well in the dark as he did in daylight. As he drew near the cabin, his steps became more dragging and blundering.

"Come on, Mac," grumbled the voice from within the cabin. "Get a move on yuh. Supper's gettin' cold, an' that makes me nervous!"

Some peculiar inflection in Justine's last words caused MacDonald to step forward without further hesitation. As he stepped through the doorway, a quick sidelong glance showed him no signs of his partner. His captor sprang in after him with a quick glance around, his six-shooter gripped tensely, ready to shoot at the least suspicious movement. His look of baffled amazement was comical to behold.

MacDonald turned triumphant eyes toward his captor, and caught the quick movement of the big sheepskin coat hanging beside the door and the flash of light upon a gun barrel.

Baldy Blair's weapon clattered to the floor as he felt something round and hard bite him in the side. Slowly, reluctantly, his hands raised toward the roof.

MacDonald went outside and soon returned with his saddle rope in hand. Quickly, the old Scotsman bound their prisoner hand and foot. Between them, they picked him up and tossed him, without ceremony, upon one of the bunks. Then Justine turned to regard his aged partner with a grin.

"Now wasn't that slick?" he chuckled boyishly. "Mac, thats' th' first excitement I've had for so long I've most forgot how to appreciate it."

MacDonald returned the grin, but it was somewhat puzzled. "But how'd yuh do it? How'd yuh know?" he ejaculated.

"Ivory," stated Justine proudly. "He done told me there was mischief afoot."

"I — I thought — he done that on account of me," stammered MacDonald, still somewhat bewildered.

"He raps at th' door when you or any wild game happens around," explained Justine, "but he don't cage around like he did tuh-night. Him snortin' that way is how I knowed yuh wasn't alone."

CHAPTER VIII

THE next morning, Justine startled MacDonald with a sudden decision. The old Scotsman stared at him in dismay. But neither reasoning nor argument could shake him from his decision.

"No, sir, I'm goin' out," he declared stubbornly. "I'm plumb fed up on just lookin' at cedars an' rocks. Mac, I've holed up here for five years now. Just think, man! Five years without th' sight of a human face other than yuhrs until this gent stepped intuh our hands las'

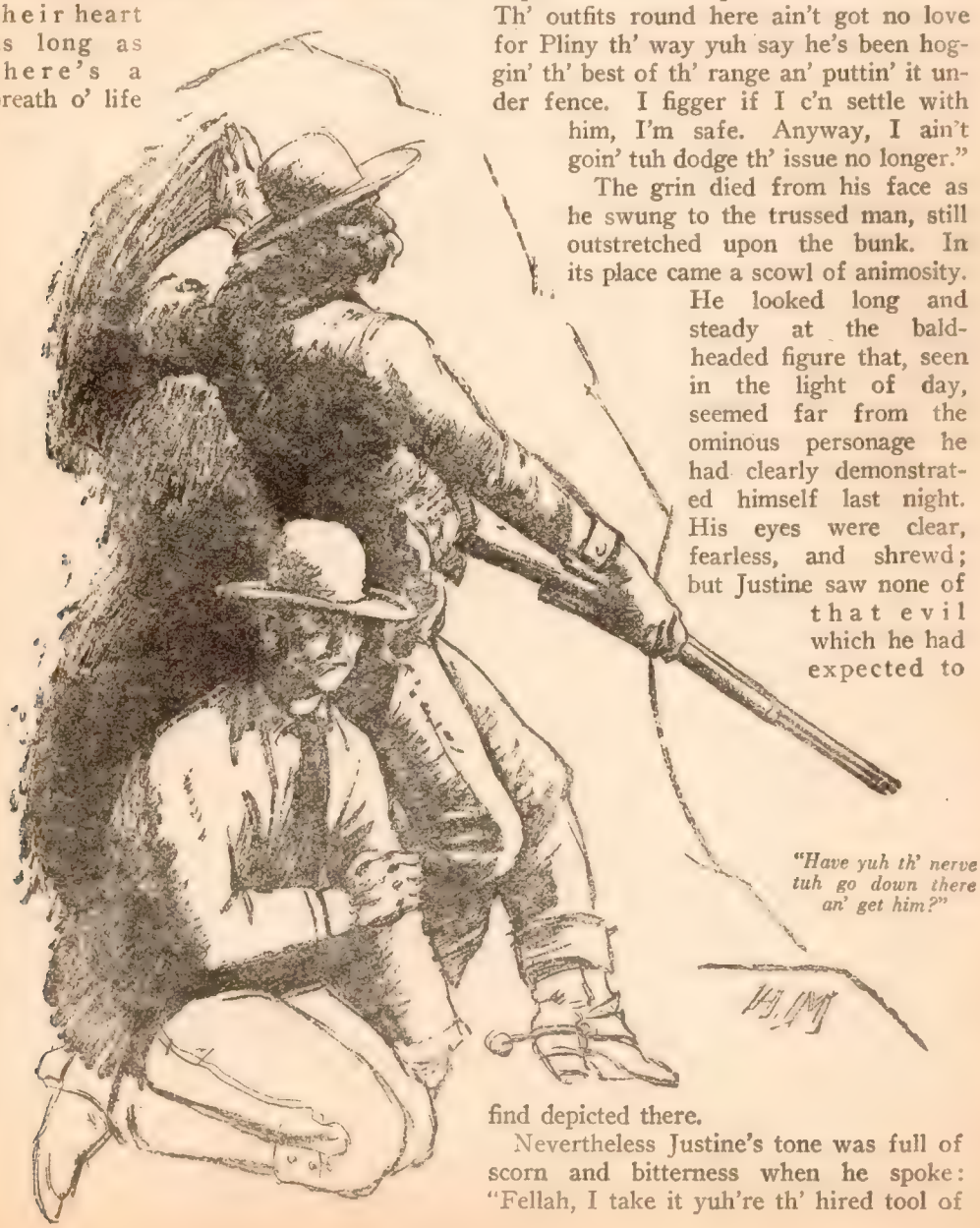
night! Think of it! Think what I've missed! Think what it means!

"I tell yuh, Mac, I'm done. I'm goin' tuh have it out with Pliny. He's th' only one that seems tuh want my head."

"He's enough," growled MacDonald. "Luke, he hates yuh like poison. He ain't forgotten yuh. He's got a mark on his face that won't let him forget. An' he's one of them kind that carries a hate in their heart as long as there's a breath o' life left for them tuh hate with. Don't yuh go, Luke. Yuh just take an' ol' man's word for it—he'll get yuh shore!"

Justine patted the old Scotsman reassuringly upon the arm. "I'm goin' tuh give him th' chance." He grinned boyishly, confidently, as he added, "But don't yuh worry, ol'-timer. He ain't goin' tuh get me. I gotta little game tuh play I'm hopin' 'll set me square with th' world. Th' outfits round here ain't got no love for Pliny th' way yuh say he's been hoggin' th' best of th' range an' puttin' it under fence. I figger if I c'n settle with him, I'm safe. Anyway, I ain't goin' tuh dodge th' issue no longer."

The grin died from his face as he swung to the trussed man, still outstretched upon the bunk. In its place came a scowl of animosity. He looked long and steady at the bald-headed figure that, seen in the light of day, seemed far from the ominous personage he had clearly demonstrated himself last night. His eyes were clear, fearless, and shrewd; but Justine saw none of that evil which he had expected to find depicted there.



"Have yuh th' nerve tuh go down there an' get him?"

Nevertheless Justine's tone was full of scorn and bitterness when he spoke: "Fellah, I take it yuh're th' hired tool of

that snake, Pliny. No one else that I know of takes this much interest in my whereabouts. I likewise notice yuh been takin' our conversation in with right lively interest, wonderin' I s'pose, what we're aimin' tuh do with yuh. I can't say I got any love for yuh, but I gotta admit I admire yuhr nerve an' brains. I don't know who yuh are, but I got my suspicons *what* yuh are. Yuh're th' first man that's ever been able tuh trail ol' Mac clear up here, an' yuh got here in th' dark. No one short of a mountain man could do that, an' a damn experienced one at that. But there was one important thing yuh didn't take intuh consideration." Justine's tone grew suddenly vibrant with emotion. "That was my hoss, Ivory. Fellah, 'fore yuh leave, I want yuh tuh cast yuhr sleepers over that hoss!"

"Yuh mean yuh're goin' tuh set me free?" exclaimed Blair, incredulously. They were the first words he had spoken since he had been taken captive.

"Hell, I commenced tuh think yuh didn't know how tuh talk," grunted Justine. Then bruskly, "Yes, I'm goin' tuh set yuh loose. I'm goin' tuh send yuh back tuh Pliny—*with a message!*"

In spite of MacDonald's protests, Justine unbound their prisoner. Then motioning him toward the door, Justine stepped outside and whistled softly. Almost instantly there came the crashing of brush, followed a moment later by the appearance of a magnificent white horse. The horse paused while yet several feet distant and regarded the three men out of mild, questioning eyes.

Blair gasped and stared. Never before had he seen a horse so snow white in color, so magnificent, symmetrically built, with a head that showed such intelligence in its every line. And his eyes! The lamps of a horse's soul! They were the softest and friendliest eyes he had ever seen. Yet Blair would have sworn he could see antagonism in them as they rested upon him for an instant.

As Justine stepped forward, the horse came clear of the brush to meet him, exposing all his superbness, his magnificence, his glory. There was pride in his bearing, as well there should be. But Blair forgot this as he caught the great love and trust depicted by this horse for his master. As Justine's arms encircled the horse's neck, he twisted his about and gently nuzzled his master's cheek with his nose, with all the effect in the world of a sweetheart's kiss.

"God, what a horse!" breathed Blair in awe.

MacDonald gave him a look of understanding. Seeing the look of trancelike wonder upon his face, the Scotsman smiled slightly.

"He's more than that," declared MacDonald softly. "Stranger, that hoss is *human!*" Then on sudden impulse, he added, "That's th' hoss Justine has been hidin' out all these years for. Can yuh blame him?"

Blair shook himself. His eyes widened. "So that's th' hoss he stole from Pliny? By God, MacDonald, I'm tempted tuh steal him myself!"

"I wouldn't advise yuh tuh try it," snorted the old Scotsman. "Luke ain't never killed a man yet, but I'm bettin' he would if he ever caught one layin' his hands on that hoss."

"Desire more'n intentions," assured Blair. "But I'll tell yuh something, MacDonald. If Pliny ever gets sight of that hoss, he'll be more determined than ever tuh get Justine."

MacDonald looked at him in quick surprise. "Say!" he exclaimed. "I don't believe yuh're such a skunk after all."

"A skunk?" Blair laughed outright. "Why, no," he drawled, "I never considered myself one before. But damned if I ain't beginnin' tuh feel like one now."

MacDonald shot him a suspicious glance. "Yuh meanin' that?" he demanded tartly.

Blair met his glance squarely. "I'm commencin' tuh think th' skunk is in Pliny," he said soberly.

MacDonald shook his head against the temptation that had suddenly assailed him. "Dammit, I wish I could believe yuh," he grumbled.

"I ain't askin' yuh to," reminded Blair gently.

And because he didn't ask, MacDonald believed him. In another minute, he was pouring out the whole miserable story of the boy and his colt, punctuating it with feeling curses and an occasional threat. It lost nothing in the telling; MacDonald held pretty close to the facts.

When he had finished, he looked anxiously at Blair. Blair's face was a picture of emotion; pity, resentment, fury. He turned eyes that were smoldering upon the Scotsman. "MacDonald," he rasped harshly, "I've always been considered an honest man. I've got a reputation that any man might well feel proud of. Then tuh have a whelp like Pliny step in an' make a plaything out of it——" Blair broke off abruptly, his rage growing too deep for further speech. His stormy eyes wandered in Justine's direction. Justine still had his arms wrapped about the horse's neck, whispering meaningless words in his ear, both seemingly oblivious to the presence of all else.

Blair's mood relaxed at the sight. He turned back to MacDonald, his emotions again under control. "I was a representative of th' law for a matter of twelve years or better, first as a deputy an' then as sheriff, over in th' Big Horn country. My term expired last year an' I resigned. Things gettin' too tame. Then this Pliny got ear of me somehow. He sent for me sayin' he had a hoss-thief over in this country no one seemed smart enough tuh catch. He offered a pretty big reward an' a satisfyin' amount of information, which last, accordin' tuh yuhr story, consisted of a heap of twisted facts."

The bald-headed man's tone suddenly turned hard, ominous. "Nobody ever played a dirty trick on me an' got away with it. If Pliny has lied tuh me, I'm goin' tuh make him sweat. Th' same applies tuh you too, MacDonald."

"Yuh c'n find some of Moore's ol' riders 'round Echo City yet. Ask them," said MacDonald simply.

Blair held out his hand. "I'm takin' yuhr word for th' present, ol'-timer," he said, wringing the Scotsman's hand reassuringly. Then walking over to Justine, he laid his hand upon the young man's shoulder. Luke turned around with a start. Blair looked him over keenly and found him lacking nothing in his standard of manhood. There were lines of suffering upon his face, and there were gray hairs upon the temples that told of a troubled mind; but the face depicted nothing but honesty.

Satisfied with his study, Blair held out his hand. "Justine," he said curtly, "MacDonald has just told me yuhr story. I always swore I'd never shake hands with a hoss-thief"—the smile that accompanied the words took away their sting—"but I'm makin' an exception in yuhr case. Boy, shake hands with a fellah that's made a regular damn fool of hisself."

Justine saw the sincerity in the other's eyes and hesitated no longer. Their hands met in a firm grip that expressed more than words.

"I'm goin' now," said Blair. "What was that message yuh was wantin' me tuh take tuh Pliny?"

"Tell him I'm comin' out, an' I'll be camped at them springs three miles east of th' ranch this very night. Tell him if he's got th' guts tuh come out there an' meet me alone, I'll give him a square deal —which is something he's never give me. Tell him if he ain't got th' nerve tuh meet me alone, tuh bring his pack of hounds along. I'll settle with his entire bunch. I guess that's all."

"He'll be there tuh-morrow mornin', Justine," stated Blair with surprising sternness. "Or if he ain't there, *I'll* be, an' with a piece of paper that'll allow yuh tuh go where yuh will in th' future."

Justine, after recovering from his surprise, tried to offer a word of gratitude, but Blair quickly silenced him. "I got a grudge here of my own tuh settle, so yuh owe me no thanks."

As he started away, MacDonald halted him with a word and handed him his six-shooter. Blair stuck it in its holster without a word, but there was a visible gleam in his eyes as he looked up. MacDonald knew the other understood. This was the greatest token of trust one man could well bestow upon another.

At the edge of the clearing, Blair turned back. "Oh, say, MacDonald," he called back, "what happened tuh Pliny that time he followed yuh up here?"

"Why, I caught him an' gave him a damn good spankin'!" shouted MacDonald back. "Why?"

"Oh, nothin'," chuckled Blair, turning back toward the brush. "He just sort of 'roused my curiosity 'bout it, was all."

A quarter of a mile from the cabin, Blair came upon a little open park. He was relieved to find his horse there just as he had left him, picketed to one of the trees. In five minutes he was mounted and heading back over the trail he had such difficulty in following the old Scotsman over the night before.

CHAPTER IX

EARLY the next morning, Blair led two saddled horses up before the ranch house. "All right, Pliny, let's go," he called.

Pliny appeared in the doorway, a scowl of irritation upon his scarred face. "I don't see no need of me going," he grumbled. "If you know where Justine is camping, why don't you go get him? That's what I'm payin' you for. Or if you're scared, let's take the gang along," he suggested hopefully.

Truth to tell, Pliny was experiencing a considerable amount of nervousness. He was sure Justine must hate him as much as he hated Justine. If Justine once caught sight of him . . . well, he had once witnessed a sample of Justine's shooting, and its memory did not help to reassure him.

"Oh, come on," growled Blair. "I sh'd think yuh'd want tuh go along an' see th' fun."

Pliny went, but with much grumbling and protest. Blair set out in an easterly direction. He had not yet given Pliny Justine's message. In fact, he had given Pliny no information at all except to tell him he knew exactly where Justine would be this morning. Pliny was wholly ignorant of Justine's close proximity. Blair had decided not to tell him Justine's message until he had him well away from the ranch. He had no desire to have others butting into his little scheme, and he knew if Pliny once suspected the game, he would have every hand on his ranch at Justine's throat in spite of all he, Blair, could do.

Pliny put up one last violent protest when he noted the direction they were headed in. "Blair, that Cedar Bluffs country is a regular death trap. We can't get up there without that fox of a MacDonald seeing us. They'll catch us like rats in a trap among them bluffs!"

"Don't worry," soothed Blair. "We ain't goin' up in th' Cedar Bluffs. Our destination ain't that far away."

Pliny looked up quickly, startled. "What d'you mean, Blair?" he demanded uneasily.

Blair again hastily reassured him. "Don't yuh worry, Pliny. Yuh jus' follow my orders an' yuh'll come out all right." If there was the faintest tinge of grim meaning in these words, Pliny evidently failed to detect it.

They had gone nearly two and a half miles from the ranch when Blair suddenly checked his mount and glanced up the short slope that separated them from the top of the ridge. Here the slope was covered with an abundance of sagebrush of sufficient height to conceal a man's prone figure. As if satitsfied with that one cursory glance of their location, Blair dismounted and tied his horse to a clump of brush, motioning his companion to do likewise. Pliny followed the silent order, puzzled, little dreaming of the surprise awaiting him.

Grasping Pliny by the arm, Blair urged him up the hill, quickly pulling him down out of sight as he caught a glimpse of the little valley on the other side. Then Blair cautiously raised his head above the brush and let his eyes sweep the valley. Less than half a mile distant, he caught sight of a magnificent white horse grazing in the vicinity of the springs where the green grass grew in abundance. His eyes wandered a bit farther and saw another white object. It was a tarpaulin, the cowboy's bed covering. And its uneven surface told him Justine still slept.

"See!" Blair pulled Pliny up beside him

and pointed to the objects below. "There, Pliny, is yuhr man. Have yuh th' nerve tuh go down there an' get him?"

Pliny's face paled. "Justine!" he gasped incredulously.

"Yes, it's Justine," returned Blair softly. "Are yuh goin' down tuh get him?"

"I—I can't!" whispered Pliny agitatedly. "You get him, Blair. I—I'll double that reward!"

Blair shook his head. "No, Pliny, it's impossible even if I had th' desire. You or I or no other man can get Justine alive so long as that white hoss is with him."

"Why?" Pliny looked his mystification.

"See!" Blair spoke purposely aloud and rose half to his feet. Then he dropped as quickly back out of sight. Both men watched the effect of Blair's maneuvers with tense, expectant eyes.

They saw the sharp upflinging of head with ears shot forward, a flash of white streaking for his master's bed, the nip of teeth as they gripped the tarpaulin and flung it aside. Then came the abrupt uprising of a man's figure, the gleam of sunlight upon a rifle barrel. The horse, his head held high, was looking squarely at their place of concealment. The man's eyes followed the same direction.

Blair turned to Pliny with a grim smile. "Well?" he demanded. Pliny was seized with a violent fit of trembling. "Well?" repeated Blair.

"Well, what?" snarled Pliny, turning on Blair in a fit of exasperation. "Don't well me! Get——"

"I'll do a damn sight worse than that to yuh, yuh lyin' cur!" gritted Blair, his rage and resentment coming to the surface with a rush. "I heard Justine's whole story, Pliny, an' I'll say yuh're th' worst snake in th' grass it's ever been my misfortune tuh meet up with. Now I'm goin' tuh give yuh yuhr choice of two courses. Yuh either write Justine out a bill o' sale for that hoss down here, or yuh're goin' out tuh meet him!"

"I won't!" Pliny's face was gray with hate and terror.

"Yuh will! That hoss b'longs tuh Justine! An' yuh'll do right by him one way or th' other!"

"He ain't got no papers tuh prove it!" snarled Pliny.

"Tuh hell with you an' yuhr papers! 'Til you an' yuhr damn syndicate come intuh this country, a man's word was as good as gold. But because yuh're a bunch of damn crooks yuhrselves, yuh don't trust nobody. Yuh gotta have ev'rything down in black an' white. But yuh'll find that ol' code still holds good here. You can't scare him into hidin' no longer. There's witnesses aplenty, now that Justine is gonna come out o' hidin' an' they know where he is, that'll swear that Moore give that hoss tuh young Justine, an' them men's word will hold good in any court of law. I was a representative of th' law for twelve years an' *I* know.

"Now, what you goin' tuh do? It's a case of writin' out that bill o' sale, or yuh go tuh meet him. I notice he's lookin' round kinda restless-like, so yuh better make up yuhr mind pronto."

"This is blackmail, sir!" cried Pliny hotly. But already his hand was fumbling for his pen.

"Blackmail, hell," snorted Blair. "It's justice!"

After Pliny handed him the piece of paper torn from his note book, Blair scrutinized it carefully. After satisfying himself there was no hidden comeback concealed in the wording, he attached his own signature as a witness, that all might know the bill of sale was correct.

He looked up to see Pliny already half way to their horses. "Just a minute, Pliny," he called bruskly. He drew up before the Easterner and thumped him upon the chest to emphasize his remarks.

"Pliny, yuh're a skunk, an' yuhr kind is gettin' too numerous out here in th' West. Take my advice an' go back East while yuh're still all together. Folks hereabouts is gettin' plumb out of patience with yuh. Th' first thing yuh know yuh're goin' tuh be dodgin' hot lead, an' that's right dangerous dodgin'. Yuh better beat it while th' beatin' 's good."

"I won't be bluffed out!" raged Pliny, fear, disappointment, and anger intermingling.

"I ain't bluffin' yuh," assured Blair earn-

estly. "I'm tellin' yuh what's for yuhr own good."

Whether Pliny believed him or not, he heeded the ex-sheriff's advice. Two days later found him boarding an eastbound train, a much humbler manager than had arrived some five years before. And uppermost in his mind was the thought that the parting advice given him by his father was largely responsible for his grave mistakes.

On the banks of the Stony River, Justine and MacDonald now have a little ranch, their substantial log house standing almost on the identical spot where the two wolves fell under young Justine's unerring aim. They are the proud possessors of several hundred head of fine horses, but Ivory is and always will be the favorite and most beloved by Justine. With very little urging, Justine will put Ivory through his category of stunts, or show you how he used to warn his master in times of approaching evil.

But most conspicuous of all is the huge picture frame, containing a leaf torn from a note book. This hangs opposite the doorway where you cannot help seeing it when entering the house. It is the bill of sale of Ivory, and proclaims to the world that Luke Justine is not a horse-thief!

(What about this novelette? See Page 168.)

TEX AUSTIN'S CHAMPIONSHIP RODEO RULES
Steer Wrestling Contest

CONDITIONS—Wrestler and Hazer will be allowed to leave the chute with steer, and wrestler's mount and steer may be Lap-and-Tap when crossing dead line, but wrestler must not have hand on steer or leap before crossing dead line. Penalty, not less than fifteen seconds.

Steer belongs to wrestler when he crosses dead line. All steers must be thrown by hand. This is a twistdown contest—wrestler must stop steer and twist him down. If steer is accidentally knocked down, he must be let up on all four feet and thrown again, and should steer start running after once being stopped and then be thrown by wrestler putting horns against the ground, then steer must be let up again and twisted down.

Wrestler to throw steer and signal judges with one hand for time. Steer will be considered down when he is lying flat on his side, all feet out and head straight. Should wrestler let steer up before being told to do so by field judge, 30 seconds will be added to his time.

Should wrestler loosen or knock off horn he shall receive no time on steer. Wrestler must be ready and take steer in his turn, or ten seconds will be added to his time. Best total time on all steers wins final money.

A time limit of two minutes will be placed on wrestling and if a wrestler has caught his steer but has not been able to throw him when the two minutes have expired he will be signaled to retire from the arena and given no time.

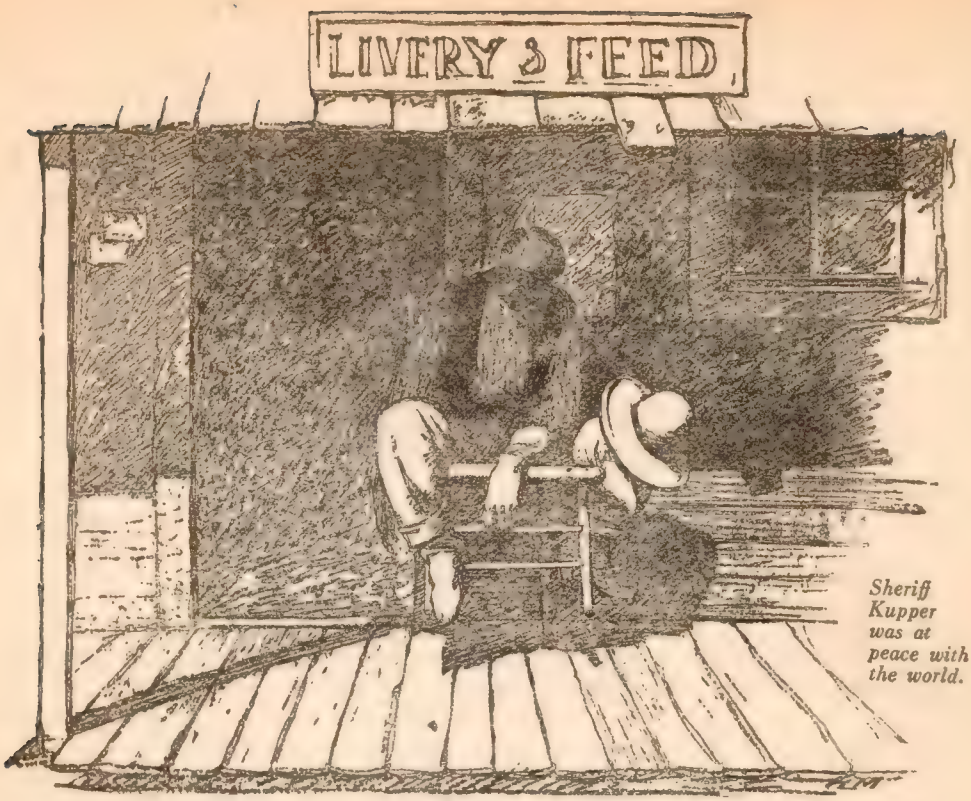
Steer wrestling or "bulldogging," as it is more commonly known in the West, is one of the most dangerous sports in which cowboys excel. It demands the speed of an athlete, the daring of an aviation pilot, the strength of a wrestler and the scientific technique of a polished boxer. Expert horsemanship and a trained cow-pony are merely incidental requirements in this contest, and grave danger is risked by even the most skillful wrestlers every time they throw themselves from the saddle to the horns of a galloping steer.

Texas long-horns are the steers used for wrestling. Their average weight is 860 pounds, while the weight of a rider averages only 160 pounds. Steers are numbered. Before each contest the wrestler must draw his steer lot, the numbers being drawn blindly from a hat. If he draws a steer he has had before he must draw another. The wrestler who throws his steer in the quickest time, while complying with all the rules, wins.

When the steer is released from the chute, it is given a start across the tape or dead line. The wrestler's objective is to ride alongside, leap from his saddle, grasp the steer's horns, and throw the animal flat on its side. He must use his hands only, and then raise one hand to signal that he has completed his task. His time is computed from the instant the starter's flag drops as the contestant crosses the tape until the field judge again drops his flag when the wrestler raises his hand, signifying that the steer is down.

Each contestant has the assistance of a rider known as his hazer. The hazer's job is to ride parallel to the contestant on the opposite side of the steer, to keep it heading straight. This is necessary to prevent its turning abruptly away and charging to some distant point at the critical moment when the wrestler makes his jump. The hazer gives no assistance in the actual wrestling.

A contestant is limited to two minutes. The world's official record for recognized contests is seven seconds and is held by Mike Hastings. Contestants are penalized fifteen seconds for touching a steer before it crosses tape, and thirty seconds for letting a steer up before the field judge orders it. Attention is called to the wonderful assistance given the wrestler by his well-trained cow-pony in overtaking and ranging alongside of the steer.



Sheriff Kupper was at peace with the world.

THE WHISTLING COWPUNCHER

By Fred B. Michelson

Illustrated by H. MELOY

Shorty made a statement, but he could not whistle it when the show-down came.

SHERIFF KUPPER tilted his whittled pine chair against the front of Jim Forbes' Livery and Feed Stable, hung his Stetson over his left knee, and settled himself for another hour of dozing. It made little difference to the sheriff that the sun had just dipped behind the sway-backed barn and that he had already slept away the greater part of the late summer afternoon.

With the exception of the effort required in batting off an occasional fly, he was at peace with the world. But this peace was soon to be disturbed. In the midst of his siesta, Shorty McGraw pounded up on a lathered pony.

"Wake up, yuh jug head!" he called as he vaulted his pudgy frame from the saddle. He stood with bow-legs apart, and his black eyes, that were like periods, glared at the sheriff.

The sheriff stirred sleepily and transferred his hat from the top of his knee to the crown of his bald head. His dull gray eyes opened for a minute, but fell again without signs of perturbation.

"How'n hell kin you lay there poundin' yer ear when the whole country is alive with hoss rustlers?" Shorty shouted.

A dumpy, red-faced man, attracted by the racket, came to the door. It was Jim Forbes, the stable owner. Shorty tossed him the reins.

Sheriff Kupper managed a yawn and jiggled his chair from the barn wall.

"What's that you're coyotin' about, Shorty? The way you yap, yuh'd think something was wrong. If half as many hell raisin's went on around here as you

tell about, you know dang well Sheriff Kupper'd be the first man to ride out of this town of Bullhead, South Dakota, with both guns cocked."

"I ain't cryin' about the pertection you give this town of Bullhead, County of Buffalo," Shorty retorted, "but I ain't been chasin' a hoss-thief through the canyons of Squaw Creek fer nothin'."

The sheriff simultaneously raised his eyelids and a sun-bronzed hand to adjust his crooked hat.

"Yeah?" he queried. "They's been a hell of a lot of rustlin' goin' on in the Squaw Creek country lately. Come to think of it, Kak Allison was tellin' me the other day that rustlers was worryin' old man Hatfield. They ain't bothered him yet, he says, and he only lives five miles up the crick."

Shorty's reply was delayed while swift thoughts chased themselves through his mind.

"Yeah, is right!" he blurted finally. "Shurf, you got about as much idea of what's goin' on around here as a groundhog has about sleigh ridin'.

"Git this right! I chased a hombre through the breaks west of old man Hatfield's place till I run him down. Sort of a ganglin' buckaroo with eyes like a pinto pony's and a axe handle nose. He looks at me like a locoed rattlesnake when I catches up with him and says, 'What kin I do fer yuh?' and then starts whistlin' a tune.

"'Goin' some place?' I asks him. He sorta unwrinkles his face and says, 'Yeah, thought I'd go into town and blow the foam off a few.'

"'Must be powerful dry,' I says, 'ridin' at that clip.'

"'It ain't the drought I'm bothered with,' he says, 'it's jest the rapid gait of this old plug I'm ridin'. He's shore a glutton fer miles—and won't turn a hair fer an hour.'

"'Mighty fine animal, if he's gentle,' I agrees, 'but where'd you come from?'

"'Jest ridin' through,' he says, and forks off again about this buckskin mustang. 'Look at the chest on him, and the muscles in them forelegs,' he says. 'And this black stripe down his back, if you know anything about hossflesh, might tell yuh how tough he is. He's lady-broke and gentle, 'cept when he goes to buckin', and then you cowboys want to have both hands empty fer pullin' leather.'"

The blank expression on Sheriff Kupper's face had changed to one of interest.

"Kak said he'd seen a rider on a buckskin hoss around there," he droned. After a moment's reflection he added, "Who do you reckon this ganglin' buckaroo is?"

"Fer God's sake, ain't I been tellin' yuh who he is? He's a hoss-thief posin' ignorant to keep his head out of the noose," Shorty said noisily, but he was thinking more about the buckskin horse than about what he was saying.

The sheriff frowned.

"Better keep an eye on 'im, huh?"

Shorty faced Jim Forbes at the stable door and turned both thumbs down.

"Says we'd better keep an eye on 'im! Right wide awake shurf, eh Jim?

"Well, Shurf," he said, facing him again, "I ain't askin' yuh to lose any beauty sleep to catch a hoss-thief, but if you'll give me the authority I'll appoint myself a committee to keep him straight around here."

"Don't know as I ever stood in your way," the sheriff said, listlessly twirling the points of his dun mustache.

Shorty gestured for silence and stepped to the corner of the barn. He lowered his hat and peered into the brilliance of the early twilight sun.

"Hang onto yer durbies, boys!" he called. "I can't see 'im, but that noise yuh hear is him. He'll come blowin' in here pretty quick like a spring chinook on a stampede."

And while Shorty spoke, the Whistling Puncher galloped around the opposite corner of the stable, the steel-shod feet of his buckskin beathing on the hard-packed turf.

"Howdy!" he greeted between notes, and swung leisurely from the saddle. He whistled to the end of his tune.

"Do yuh have to screw your face up that way to whistle, or is that natural?" Shorty addressed him.

"It's natural—whistlin' always did come

easy," he answered, stretching his face in a molar grin, the skin pulling tight over the point of his "axe handle" nose.

"If you're goin' to whistle around this shank of the range, you'd better take to sellin' peanuts to pertect it or somebody'll put a bullet in your air tank."

The Puncher hitched up his Angora chaps and notched the belt around his lean hips.

"I usually git along all right," he laughed.

"Yeah, you'll probably git along, but what direction yuh ridin' when yuh do?" Shorty fired back.

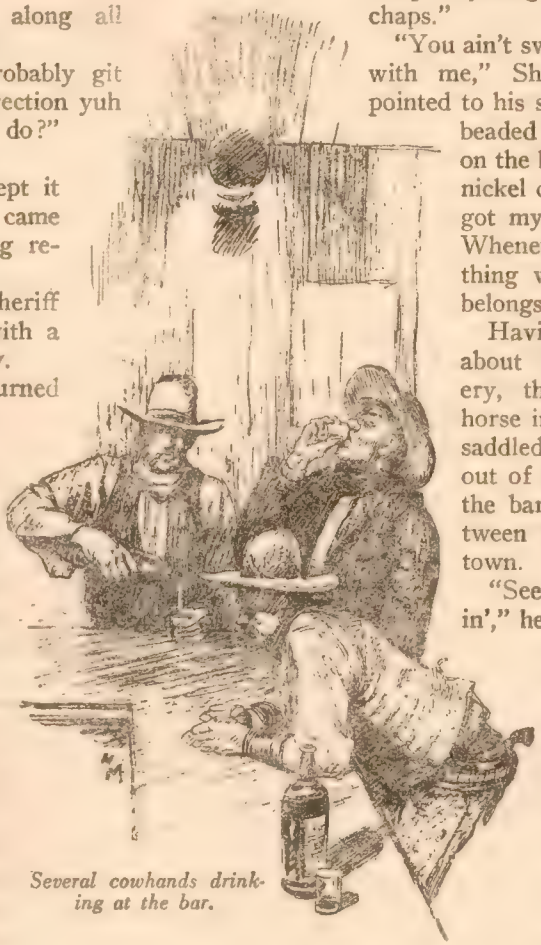
"Don't know, 'cept it won't be West," came the half challenging reply.

The hidden sheriff stepped forward with a gesture of authority.

The puncher turned to stroke his buckskin's nose.

"He's the best cayuse that ever nibbled the nigger-wool off'n a hill. Gentle as a kitten 'cept when yuh fire a gun from his back, then——"

"They's three feet of that stuff in the shed over yonder," the sheriff cut in. "I ain't disputin' that the hoss is all right, but ain't you herded 'em just a little too long?"



Several cowhands drinking at the bar.

The Whistling Puncher's droll voice crackled a little now.

"If you ain't too proud, do yuh mind tellin' me who yuh are?" he asked.

Sheriff Kupper stepped closer and pulled back his coat. The weight of a polished badge made wrinkles in the lower part of his checkered vest.

"This bunker plate might let yuh know who I am." He smiled smugly and swaggered back to his chair.

During the sheriff's inning, Shorty had been wondering how he might euchre this human calliope out of his buckskin horse.

"Wanta swap that crowbait off? Got a hoss in here that shore kin split the breeze!" he said.

"Ain't swappin' hosses to-day, but I'll swap anything else from hats to chaps."

"You ain't swappin' hats or chaps with me," Shorty retorted. He pointed to his sombrero. "See that beaded band? Made right on the hat. And them solid nickel conches on my chaps got my monogram on 'em. Whenever yuh see anything with "SM" on it, it belongs to me."

Having heard enough about Shorty's haberdashery, the Puncher led his horse into the stall and unsaddled. He went whistling out of the barn and across the barren lot that lay between the stables and the town.

"See yuh in the mornin'," he called at the sheriff and Shorty in passing.

Shorty nudged the sheriff.

"You stick to his trail!" he said, squinting his eyes.

The sheriff gazed back at him for a moment with the expression of a boy scout.

"You leave that to me," he hazarded.

The Puncher stopped to look around at the pump and watering trough which stood in the center of the lot. Away from the barn he could see across several miles of bronze prairie to the west and the south, rolling on until the swells lost themselves in the heights of Antelope Divide. A long buggy shed cut off his view to the north,

and to the east the half dozen buildings that were the town left to his eyes only narrow strips of country, brown like the erst, and tinseled with patches of sagebrush. The town, the hills, and the flats lay sluggish in the drowsy twilight.

Across the street at the hitching-rack, two cow-ponies switched mosquitoes and tossed their heads to ward off a lingering nose fly. They indicated to him which one of the town's doors belonged to the saloon, and he strode on, the jingle of his spurs keeping time to the tune he whistled.

Inside the saloon he noticed several cowhands, well along with hootch, drinking at the bar. Several others filled the chairs in the rear of the room. Still whistling, the Puncher bellied up and ordered a round for the house.

"Here's to yuh and that tune yuh was whistlin'. Ain't heard 'Gonna be a Ball in the Old Town Hall' since I was up on Milk River," a drunken cowboy said, and sprung a flow of tobacco juice in the general direction of the spittoon. "Gonna be workin' round here?"

"Jest blew in from Thunderhead country tuh soak up a little," the Puncher answered evasively. "It's powerful dry up there and I don't want the hoops to fall off'n this old barrel of mine."

"Gonna be round here?" the soak repeated.

"Yeah," the Puncher said in an off-hand manner. "Gonna work for old man Hatfield during the round-up."

The drinking continued round after round, but the Puncher was not only absorbing beer. Over the top of his glass as he drained its amber liquid, he watched the back door. And from that perspective he saw Sheriff Kupper enter and stand for a moment in the semi-darkness. Furtively the sheriff went to an empty poker table and found a chair, pulling his black Stetson down until the brim was parallel with the pitch of his nose. His dull eyes watched the men at the bar, eagerly for a time, but soon he nodded and shortly afterwards fell asleep. For more than an hour he sat snoozing with arms locked across his chest and the precariously balanced Stetson threatening to tumble with each snore.

At the bar the cowboys toasted the alertness of Bullhead's sheriff, but his siesta was not to be interferred with until Dogy Lampman decided to give him a beer shampoo.

"Gad dang your hide, Dogy!" the sheriff yelled, springing from his chair blowing beer. "I got a notion to lock you in the hoosegow and throw the key away. You ain't got the sense of a wore-out saddle blanket."

"Now Shurf, you're lettin' yer temper stampede with yuh. Here's how it happened, Shurf. I was bringin' yuh a little snifter when this maverick Hank got to prancin' and spilled a eye-dropperful on your head."

The sheriff laid a hand on Dogy's shoulder and staggered him aside. Excitement blazed in his face.

"Where'd that dang whistlin' puncher git to? Anybody see him go out?"

"Been gone a hour," Dogy consoled.

Sheriff Kupper dove for the butt of his gun and dashed out the front door.

Outside the gloom of late evening hung heavily and the sky, a washed blue, was punctured by a lone star that stood in the smudgy streak above Antelope Divide. It winked dutifully as if its bidding were to light the world alone. The bronze prairie that unfolded in the semi-darkness seemed to have been transmuted to wrought iron.

The sheriff hastened past the sleeping cow-ponies and went to the livery stable. The sliding door, which rolled on a sagging track, stood open barely far enough to let him squeeze through. He went directly to the stall where the Whistling Puncher had left his horse. It was empty. Shorty's horse was gone, too, he noticed in a glance. He swore and wiped the moisture from his forehead.

Awakened by the sheriff's cursing, Jim Forbes came to the door of the stable office.

"What'll yuh have?" he growled, as was his manner with late customers.

"Where's Shorty?" the sheriff called back. "That dang Whistlin' Puncher has took his horse and gone."

"Shorty said to tell yuh he had tuh ride back home and he'd see yuh in the morning," Jim said, and yawned cavernously.

"Jest like that dang hoodlum to be gone when——"

The sheriff stopped short, and with more speed than he had applied to his legs since Butte County was a territory, he went to the desultory hotel.

"What's up?" the keeper asked, reading excitement in the sheriff's face.

"Seen anything of that ganglin' buckaroo that blew into town to-night? Yuh ain't, huh? Got a room here, ain't he?"

The keeper nodded affirmation. Sheriff Kupper's jaw dropped. He stood rubbing his chin whiskers a moment, then walked from the hotel.

Sheriff Kupper was glum the next morning as he sat with his dusty boots thrown over the corner of his desk wondering just what he'd tell Shorty about the Whistling Puncher's getaway.

A half-hour later he still sat pondering the effortless thoughts that came and went, when he heard the clank of spurred feet on the board walk outside. It was Shorty and Kak Allison coming to see him.

"What's up?" the sheriff called as they entered the office, trying to smile naturally. "What in tarnation happened, Shorty? Looks like the wolves been after yuh!"

Shorty glanced self-consciously at his right hand, the thumb of which was bandaged and splinted.

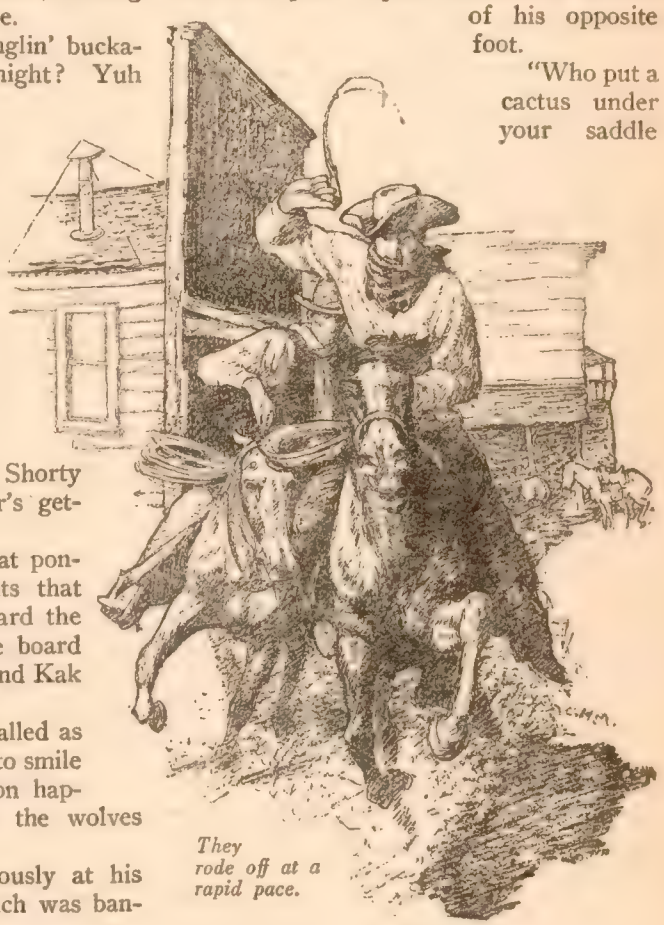
"Went up in the loft to throw down some hay fer my hoss and I like to fell through the feed hole," he answered lightly. "God dang it, I lost a couple conches off my chaps, to boot—nickel plated and had my monogram on 'em too."

Suddenly Shorty's mood changed and he drew the corners of his mouth down in a sneer.

"I s'pose yuh think you kin ride that swivel chair in the round-up after this murderin' thief yuh was so careful to let get away last night. Did he pat yuh on the cheek and tell yuh he didn't mean no harm?"

Shorty bunted open the gate in the railing that set off the sheriff's desk from the remainder of the office and eyed him nastily. Kak settled himself against the rail and spun a spur rowell with the toe of his opposite foot.

"Who put a cactus under your saddle blanket?" the sheriff muttered sullenly.



They rode off at a rapid pace.

Shorty's eyes flashed and he raised his voice.

"The same person that forgot to put one in the seat of your chair."

The sheriff looked down his nose a moment.

"Dang you, Shorty!" he warmed. "What in tarnation is eatin' on yuh?"

"Sit still, Sheriff. It ain't worth both-

erin' about. Jest a little killin' and fifty or sixty head of hosses stole."

Sheriff Kupper rose quickly.

"Who's been killed?"

"You ain't expected to know," Shorty lipped. "Maybe you'd better tell him, Kak, I ain't got the heart."

Kak pushed back his Stetson and shifted a brown-paper cigarette to the other corner of his mouth. His mild gray eyes took in Shorty's length for some time, and then he spoke.

"There ain't much to tell," he began slowly, "'cept that old man Hatfield was killed last night and a bunch of hosses stole."

"How in heck did you git so dadgum wise?" the sheriff mumbled in his mustache, his cheeks pinking with anger. "You act like a locoed jackrabbit," he added lamely, and turned to Kak. "If this dang jackass won't be sensible, I'll have to get the dope from you, Kak. What about old man Hatfield bein' murdered?"

"That's about all they is to it. I been lookin' out for him a little, and when I rode up this morning, I seen him layin' there," Kak explained.

"Layin' where?"

"At his own ranch. He's layin' face down on the manure pile."

"Now what do you reckon they done that for?" the sheriff said dumbly.

"I suppose someone tried to steal his hosses and he put up a fight. He's been pennin' 'em every night lately."

"Humph," the sheriff commented. "Did you see it too, Shorty?"

"How in hell would I see it?" Shorty growled. "I seen the bird that done it though."

"Where?"

"Where! Right here in your own peaceful little town, fer God's sake," Shorty sneered. "You don't reckon that pie-faced buckaroo come down here to hold a box social, do yuh?"

"I'll admit," the sheriff said meekly, "the ganglin' coyote wasn't any place around these parts last night, so far as I could see."

"No, and he ain't any place around here now. I seen him leadin' his hoss out of the barn just before Kak come," Shorty said quietly.

"Why didn't yuh tell me, yuh sheepherder?"

"What good'd that do, Shurf? You'd probably gone out and waved good-bye to him. Yuh ain't got nothin' on him anyway."

"The hell I ain't. Wasn't his horse gone from the stable last night? And I'll dang soon have some handcuffs on him if I catch up to him," the sheriff fumed. With a sudden burst of enthusiasm he started for the door. "Come along men, I might need a couple extra shootin' irons."

They went to the barn and Sheriff Kupper hurried to the stall where the buckskin had been tethered. He returned wearing a look of disappointment.

"He's gone all right," he said blandly.

"Jim!" Shorty mouthed. "Where are yuh, yuh damned old lobster?"

Jim came trotting out.

"Where's that buckskin hoss?" Shorty asked.

"He come and took him," Jim answered.

"When?"

"'Bout a hour ago."

"Which way did he go?"

"Didn't pay no 'tention."

"What did the hoss look like?"

"He was gant as a greyhound, like he'd been run to death."

Shorty looked at the sheriff with an accusing squint.

"There ain't much question about *that*, is there Shurf? But just what the hell yuh gonna do about it?"

The sheriff blinked while his none too efficient brain fidgited for the answer.

"Ride after him, of course," he said indecisively. He lifted his hat and scratched his head. "You boys get your hosses and come along," he said. He hastened to saddle his black gelding and sat astride him waiting for Shorty and Kak. They joined him presently and the three rode off at a rapid pace.

Though it was yet quite early, the autumn sun had already sucked the night's moisture from the powder-dry prairie, and heat waves miraged the landscape. Alkali dust from the speeding hoofs clouded

around them and coated on their faces and clothing. They rode down draws here and climbed pitches there, to scan the rolling stretches ahead. Higher toward the crest of Antelope Divide, they again strained their eyes for a glimpse of the buckskin horse and its rider. Several miles later Sheriff Kupper reined in.

"We can't be on the right track, boys. We been ridin' to beat the devil and ain't seen him yet."

"Well, what next, Sherlock?" Shorty heckled.

"What do you think, Kak?" the sheriff asked in a baffled voice. "Tain't far to old man Hatfield's place," he answered his own question. "Maybe we'd better go over and pick up the clues."

Kak nodded. Shorty glowered at him and rode sullenly along.

"Gettin' lonesome for that swivel chair, Officer?" he asked finally. "Old man Hatfield had a chair that I reckon you could take a snooze in and maybe hold out till you get back to town."

The sheriff pretended deafness. He dug his black with the spurs and broke into a gallop. Kak followed, but Shorty held back. After a moment's thought he reached a decision and slashed his horse with the quirt. He came racing up alongside of the sheriff.

"See here, Shurf," he began abruptly. "I been pretty tough with you all day. No harm meant by it. Thought I'd better get long-horned to make it seem more serious to yuh. Anything you say, goes. You're the law, and just like always, Shorty McGraw's goin' to stand by yuh."

The sheriff shifted his eyes from between his horse's ears where they had rested for the last dozen miles.

"That sounds more like yuh, yuh danged old coyote. Thought yuh must be full of hooch the way yuh been actin'," the sheriff answered, and his melancholy countenace brightened stifly.

"Awright, Shurf — we'll call it off," Shorty agreed, and he extended his hand. The sheriff took it.

"I don't wanta butt in, Shurf," Shorty began, "but I think we orta keep right on goin' in the direction we was headed. Jest like you said, that long-nosed buckaroo has probably hit fer the breaks."

"I been thinkin' about that," the sheriff agreed, "but I guess we'd better go on to the ranch seein' that we're almost there."

Shorty opened his mouth to speak, but thinking better of it, coughed. They rode on in silence, letting their heat-reddened eyes scan the waves of hills around them. At the bottom of a draw they watched a whirlwind whip up the dust and sweep away in a conical spiral.

Just over the ridge was old man Hatfield's ranch, visible from the hill-top through the shimmering air—a log house, long and narrow and low; a stable of the same style, both with dirt roofs; a pole corral and a squatty thatched-roof cattle shed. Lodgepole creek cut a crooked channel to the left of the buildings, bending in a half circle around the stables and shed. A hundred yards farther down was the waterhole, the justification for the ranch site. A scraggly cottonwood tree with yellow-edged leaves was mirrored in the water and a bunch of white-faced cattle, which had come earlier in the day to drink, now chewed their cuds in the shade of the tree or stood knee-deep in the stagnant water.

Shorty took off his hat to get the cooling effect of a breeze that brushed over the tip of the hill.

"She's shore a scorcher to-day, ain't she?" he asked abstractedly.

"Shore is," Kak economized, speaking for the first time since they set out.

There were no further words as the riders rocked through the waterless creek-bed and skirted the fence that enclosed the haystacks. They dismounted in front of the stable, and Kak led the way to the body on the manure pile.

"I guess he's dead all right," the sheriff remarked solemnly. "Guess we'd better get that cowhide over there on the corral fence and carry him out of these gnats and blowflies." He stood in deep thought for a moment. "There ain't nothin' mean enough fer that dang whistlin' pirate for shootin' a man down in cold blood jest fer a few head of hosses," he said, philosophically.

Kak and Shorty turned to get the cowhide from the fence.

"Hold on a minute," the sheriff called. "What's this?" He pointed to the imprint of a booted foot turned in the direction of the barn.

"Listen!" Kak interrupted, holding up his hand. After a silence he said: "Thought I heard a horse stampin', but I guess not."

During the moment of quiet an eerie sense of mystery had charged the air. The dead body on the ground seemed now to cast a weird reflection over the entire ranch basin. Again the breathing of the three men became softer as they listened for stamping feet.

Kak and Shorty turned again to get the cowhide. They had not gone far when unmistakably and from nearby came the whinney of a horse.

"In the barn!" Kak whispered. He reached reflexly for his gun. "Slip around and watch the feed hole in the rear. Sheriff, you watch the front door, and I'll keep the side door guarded."

They went quickly to their places with guns drawn, watching the openings and crevices of the barn. As they closed-in, they heard distinctly the jingle of spurs against the hard dirt floor inside. They waited tense with expectation. Abruptly the head and shoulders of a man framed itself in the upper half of the two-part front door.

Sheriff Kupper's lower jaw went limp with fear.

"Throw 'em in the air!" he managed, and with which command he leveled his gun in all directions.

As the man obeyed, steadiness crept back into his hand, the usual firmness returned to the sheriff's limp jaw. The blurred outline of the man he faced now began to take on a familiar shape. Gradually he realized he faced the Whistling Cowpuncher.

"This way, boys!" the sheriff called, and the boys came running.

"Well, if it ain't our tuneful friend that rides the buckskin hoss," Shorty smirked.

The Whistling Puncher narrowed his eyes in a grin and the white spot on his nose loomed larger as the skin stretched tight over the point.

"Better do yer chessy catin' now," Shorty addressed him again. "It ain't goin' to be so funny after a while."

Kak's eyes were cemented on the Puncher. "Better step out from behind that door," he said with mild caution.

"Anything to please you gentlemen—or you either Shorty McGraw," the Puncher answered, kicking the door open with his foot.

He came forward deliberately, his hands held above his head.

"Why don't one of yuh come and git this shootin' iron out of my northwest hip pocket?" he wanted to know. "This is a powerful tiresome position, if yuh ask me."

"Go ahead and git it, Kak," the sheriff ordered. "I'll keep him covered."

Kak obeyed, slipping the big .45 caliber Colt's into his own hip pocket.

His hands again by his side, and all the guns out of sight, the Whistling Puncher felt easier. He faced Shorty.

"What's the matter with the thumb, Shorty? Been twiddlin' 'em too much?" he asked drily, his eyes twinkling.

Shorty glowered at his bandaged thumb.

"Yeah, it's funny, ain't it, to see a man with a sore thumb?"

"And say, do yuh still want to swap me fer the buckskin hoss?" the Puncher cut in flippantly.

"Don't be any more of a jackass than yuh have to," Shorty sneered again.

"Well, maybe you'd like to ride him around the lot and shoot a few times from his back. He's lady-broke and gentle until yuh go to shootin' off'n his back and then, believe me cowboys, he's a fence rollin', sunfishin' fool. He's awful hard to ride, too, ain't he Shorty?"

Shorty's black eyes flared up like fanned coals and he fastened them on the Puncher's half-smiling face.

"What do yuh think you're gettin' at, yuh night ridin' coyote?" Shorty raved. "Yuh ain't talkin' to a Greaser, and yuh can peddle that stuff to the convicts down at the Pen." He turned to the sheriff with a limp gesture of disgust. "How long yuh

goin' to listen to that loose mouth of his run off like that?"

"Guess we've had about enough of it," the sheriff confirmed. "You watch the hombre, Kak. Shorty and me'll take a look around."

"What's them tracks over yonder?" Shorty asked. "Here they go!"

"Horseshoe prints," the sheriff answered.

"Shore as hell—see 'em? Kickin' up more dirt all the time like he was makin' speed."

Shorty lurched ahead.

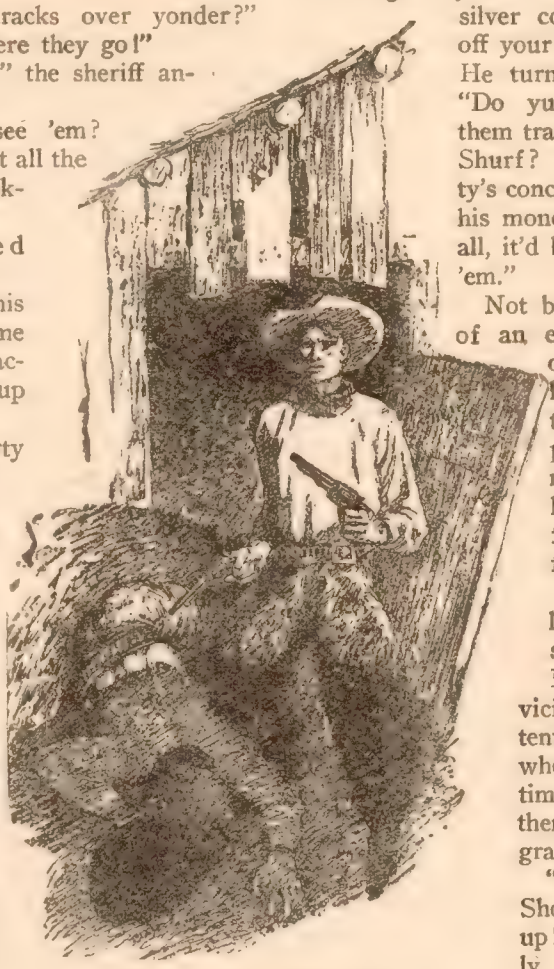
"Where'd this horse jewelery come from?" he asked accusingly, holding up a polished shoe.

"Well, I'm a dirty name," the sheriff muttered. "The Puncher's buckskin was wearin' shoes—we'll just take a look and see if he's got 'em all yet."

They returned to the barn and led the buckskin out.

"It's off'n his left forefoot. See, it's gone," Shorty said, lifting the leg and fitting the shoe to the hoof.

The Puncher watched Shorty from the heel of his eye.



"And you was the only man I couldn't find in town."

"Yeah," he agreed. "I noticed it was gone this morning when I got the hoss from the livery stable. He must of threw it the same time you sprung your thumb."

"If I done right, I'd shoot you down where yuh stand!" Shorty roared.

"Yeah, just like yuh done right by old man Hatfield?"

"You dirty, killin' curr," Shorty yelled, lunging toward him.

Kak stepped between them and jerked Shorty's hand from the butt of his gun.

"Use your head!" he said gruffly.

There was a moment of sullen quiet while the Puncher scanned Shorty with metal eyes.

"Yuh got any idea what become of them silver conches that's gone off your chaps?" he asked. He turned to the sheriff. "Do yuh mind followin' them tracks a little farther, Shurf? You'll find Shorty's conches for him. With his monogram on 'em and all, it'd be a shame to lose 'em."

Not being able to think of an excuse, the sheriff obeyed. Shorty's knees quirked, but the anger that purpled his face and made him crunch his teeth, offset any fear he may have felt.

"You damn louse-bound, lyin' sneak, I'll . . ." He drew his gun viciously with full intent to kill, but Kak wheeled around in time to step between them again. They grappled.

"Damn you, Shorty, put that gun up!" Kak said savagely. For the moment he seemed to forget that he was guarding a man suspected of murder.

In a quick glance, the Whistling Puncher saw the butt of his own gun sticking from Kak's hip pocket. Whirling deftly on his heel, he grabbed it. As quickly he backed off, leveled the big black .45, and cocked it.

"All right, boys, now cut out that wrestlin' and drop them guns," he drawled. There was a pause. "And be quick about it!" he added huskily.

They knew without looking that they

were covered. Kak's gun thudded the ground and Shorty's followed.

"I don't like the looks of your ugly faces—swear to God they'd gag a mule. Guess yu'd better march over and face the barn wall," the Puncher chided. "Forward March! Hip, Hip, Hip!" he sang out as his quarry marched ahead of him.

Glancing quickly over his shoulder, he saw the sheriff returning. His eyes were glued on objects he carried in his hand.

"Here comes the sheriff with your pretties, Shorty. Yuh kin put 'em back on your chaps so they won't look so cussed ugly," he went on. His gun swung slowly around on the sheriff.

"You, too, Shurf. Better put 'em in the air, till we git this little matter straightened out. Awright, it won't be painful if yuh listen to what I say. But hang onto them leather decorations."

The sheriff's hands had gone up like signals at a railroad crossing. His eyes were bulged and bewildered. The Puncher relieved him of his gun and the conches, rewarding him with a pleasant grin.

"Better go over and hide your face with them other hombres. We're playin' a little game of button, button, who owns the buttons."

When the sheriff had lined up, the Puncher whirled his gun twice on his index finger and closed in behind Shorty.

"Ever see these before, Shorty? Pretty, ain't they?" he said, holding out the conches. "Remember you told me yesterday that any time I saw anything with "SM" on it, it belonged to Shorty McGraw? And I'm shore willin' to believe a man when he tells me anything. Yuh know, if you'd 'a' believed me when I told you the buckskin pitched a little when yuh shot off'n his back, yuh wouldn't of got your thumb broke or lost your conches. You know, just a little before dark I went down to the stable and my hoss was gone, and you was the only man I couldn't find in town. In the mornin' you both showed again. It's an old trick of yours to ride somebody else's hoss when you go out thievin', ain't it? But yuh pulled it just once too many times."

The smile left the Puncher's face for a moment.

"It's a damn good thing you put your crowbait out in the buggy shed or you'd had company comin' home this mornin'," he added.

After a silence, he went on. "It ain't so funny now is it Shorty? No? I guess old man Hatfield could tell yuh how funny it is if he could sit up on the manure pile and tell yuh he sent fer me to come down and help clean out you rustlers."

Shorty cast an unclean look over his shoulder. The Puncher's grin returned, broader than before.

"Yuh don't believe it, huh?" he laughed. "Well, you kin do jest as you're a mind to about that. Maybe the judge will."

"Let's have them bracelets, Shurf, and I'll fix this bird; then you boys can git your hands down," the Puncher chuckled.

"He wasn't so hard to catch, was he, Kak?" he went on, slapping Kak on the shoulder. "But kin you imagine a horse-thief who goes along with the posse to help catch himself?"

Kak joined the Puncher in a few guffaws.

The sheriff turned around with a three-for-a-nickel expression and handed over the handcuffs.

"I'm a dirty name!" he muttered dully.

(*Did this story please you? See Page* 168.)

Straight became an outlaw.

LEFT-HANDED RELATIONS

By Peter A. Lea

Illustrated by H. MELOY

A pet aversion will come to the surface sometimes in most unexpected ways.

ON a ranch just outside of St. Davids, Arizona, "Ole Jim Robsin" fondles his gun and swears he will get the man who robbed him. But he never has. He was able to give only a meager description, but on one point he was positive; the outlaw was short with a hunch between his shoulders, walked as if he had been lamed, and Robsin speaks scathingly of him as "Camelback."

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a young chap and his wife talk in affectionate tones of a pony called Pinto and its rider who gave them happiness and wealth. They wish they knew his name but somehow they never found out.

On the edge of the Mojave Desert in California sits the richest claim owner, counting the percentage of gold that comes out with the sand from his mine, grinning to himself cheerfully as he contemplates his next adventure.

Thomas William Straight was brought up in a small town in Pennsylvania on a diet of stepmothers. He had two before he was twelve, and three years later when his father announced his intention of marrying again, Thomas William ran away.

He didn't remember his own mother, but he was sure in his mind that she was unlike any of the women his father selected after her. He was certain for one thing that she would not beat him if he came home from school ten minutes late, or slap his face on the least provocation.

The boy was big for his age, awkward and shy, with a sensitive mouth, deepset gray eyes and jet black hair.

The first man to give him a job owned a coal yard. He found him willing and eager for work. Too eager. In the course of six months, the heavy loading and unloading in the yard found his shoulders stooped, his legs and arms too long and

his hands hard and calloused. Then his employer's wife, who had been kind to him, died and left a little girl of three, Thomas William's own age when his mother had been taken from him. In a few months, the husband was calling on the richest widow in town, and Straight left on his next payday without saying good-bye.

He was twenty-five when he landed at Douglas, Arizona. There was a hard and fast crowd there, and somehow Thomas William got mixed up with them.

He had done about everything there was to do—except get in jail. He had worked on railroads in Ohio; been a taxi driver in Chicago; farmed in the middle West; gone "on tower" in Oklahoma during an oil boom; rustled cattle in Texas; prospected for pay dirt in New Mexico; and just when he was offered a job in the smelter at Douglas, the crowd planned a party "across the line" and Straight went along.

Somehow during the wild night that followed, a man got shot. No one knew who did it exactly, but every one in the party carried a gun and felt guilty. The crowd separated, going in every direction save toward Douglas.

In his own mind at least, Straight became an outlaw. The idea rather thrilled him. He saw himself a man hunted by day and night; and because his conscience was clear, he laughed and enjoyed it alone.

He had about two hundred dollars and he bought himself, for twenty in silver, a good pony named Pinto, and the two started out to make Arizona their own. There was nothing particularly definite in Straight's mind save the decision to become an outlaw in reality; and to prove to himself he could back up his desire, he planned to rob the first man who displeased him—and always to work alone.

He rode his pony into the tiny village of St. Davids, made friends with the young clerk in the general store there, and through him eventually met the foreman of a large ranch nearby and was given a job.

Thomas William worked hard for a couple of weeks, but he was getting impatient. All the other hands were pleasant enough, and no man who had anything worth taking had claimed his ill will. Then payday came, and with it the owner of the ranch, "Ole Jim Robsin" as the men called him, and who rarely came near them, spending all his time in the big ranch house his wife left him on the State Highway.

Now Straight knew that Robsin had a daughter Jean, who was in love with a young man by the name of Yorke who lived in St. Davids. Yorke wanted to marry her and go East where a good position awaited him, but the girl's father would not allow it. This was none of Thomas William's business and he paid scant attention when the other men talked, until one of them let drop the fact that the girl's mother was rich long before she married "Ole Jim" and that he was Jean's stepfather.

"Stingy as hell he is, too," the man added vindictively. "It's all the kid's money or ought to be an' he don't buy her even decent clothes. She has t'do all the work in the house, too; he won't have anybody else around. He hadn't a red cent when her Ma married him either. Now he keeps all her money in the house, won't let even a bank make a penny outa him. I heard he counts his coppers every night too. Somebody sure oughta relieve him of that job!"

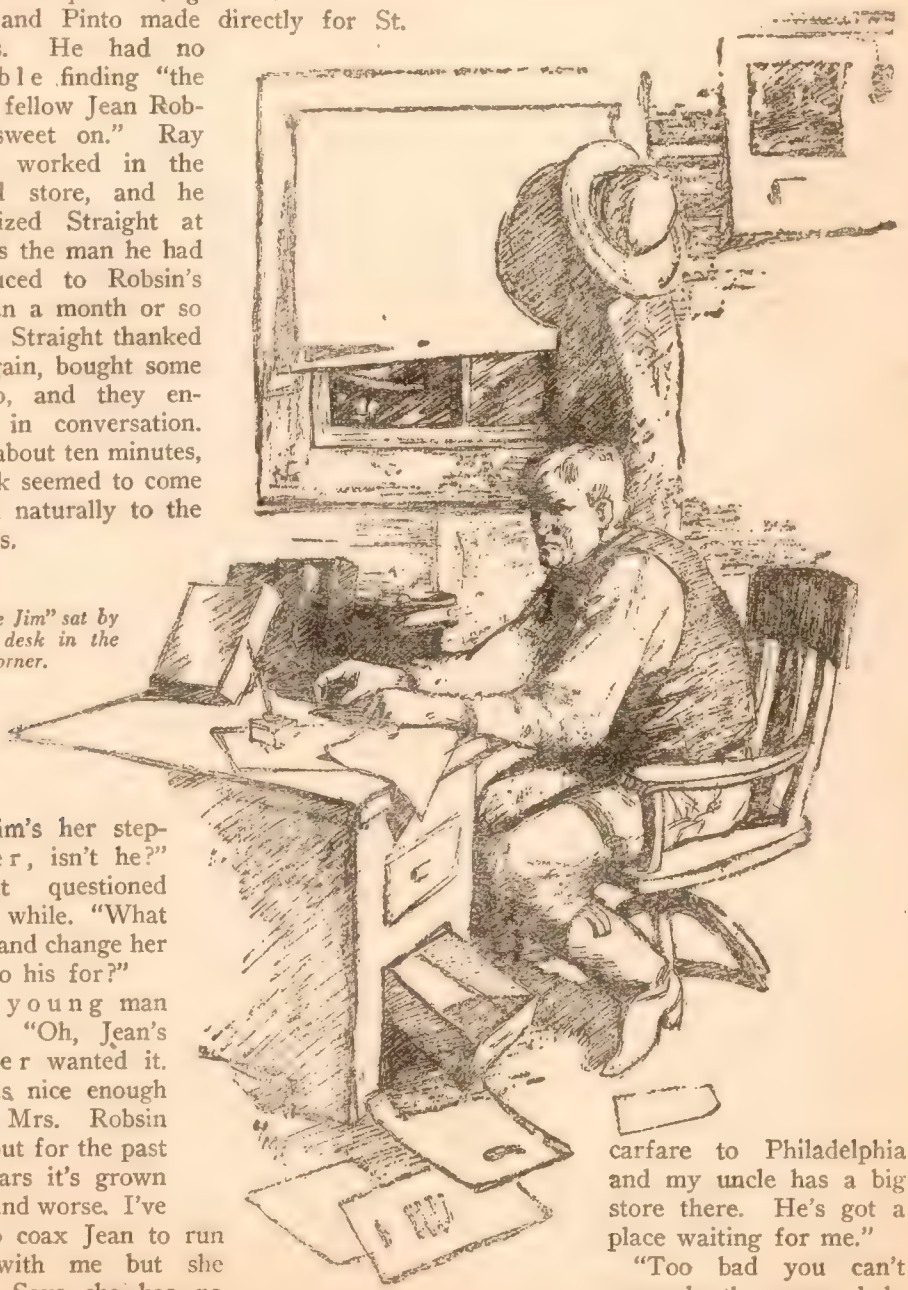
Thomas William Straight almost fell from his bunk as he listened. All his old hatred of stepmothers came back with renewed force. Stepfathers must be worse! This poor young girl, Jean Robsin, whom he had never seen, had one! Here was his opportunity and with a good motive to back it up.

When Robsin arrived at noon to pay the men, Straight looked him over carefully. He wanted to be sure of his man. He saw a short, stocky individual with bushy iron-gray brows and hair. Robsin's face was weatherbeaten and his eyes were brown, narrow and slanting. There was a slight cross in one of them. His mouth dropped at the corners, and he carried an air of inelegant arrogance that didn't set

well with other men. It was just as well he left all his ranch business to a pleasanter man.

The next day, Straight asked the foreman for time off, and, because he had not been away from the ranch since his arrival, the request was granted.

He and Pinto made directly for St. Davids. He had no trouble finding "the young fellow Jean Robsin's sweet on." Ray Yorke worked in the general store, and he recognized Straight at once as the man he had introduced to Robsin's foreman a month or so before. Straight thanked him again, bought some tobacco, and they engaged in conversation. After about ten minutes, the talk seemed to come around naturally to the Robsins.



"Ole Jim" sat by his desk in the corner.

"Ole Jim's her stepfather, isn't he?" Straight questioned after a while. "What she go and change her name to his for?"

The young man sighed. "Oh, Jean's mother wanted it. He was nice enough while Mrs. Robsin lived, but for the past two years it's grown worse and worse. I've tried to coax Jean to run away with me but she won't. Says she has no money and would have to go without clothes or anything. You know how girls generally are about things like that."

Straight did not know, but he nodded understandingly.

Yorke went on confidentially: "I've our carfare to Philadelphia and my uncle has a big store there. He's got a place waiting for me."

"Too bad you can't persuade the young lady to go," Straight said

sympathetically. "I'd like to help you out like you did me when I needed this job."

Young Yorke sighed again. "I guess there's nothing to do," he said ruefully, "but just wait a little longer and see what happens."

"Why don't you make something happen?" Straight suggested subtly. "Now, I've been doing a heap o' thinking since we've been talkiig this over. See here—there's a train East out of Douglas early in the morning. You set the day and I'll try to have Miss Jean Robsin on hand in time to get married and take the drawing-room."

Ray Yorke laughed. "Well *I've* never been able to persuade her, old man, and I don't believe anybody else could. Still, I'd be ready to do it pronto," he admitted, "but——"

"Never mind the 'buts' Yorke," Straight cut in. "To-morrow night suit you about right?"

Yorke looked at him curiously. "By George, I believe you know something," he guessed. "I can have my car ready for the drive to Douglas, sure, but . . ." He stopped, then added: "Maybe it'll be a wild goose chase without the goose, but I'll chance it. I'd do most anything to get Jean to marry me and leave out here!"

Thomas William smiled shrewdly as he rolled up his old sweater, put it under his shirt and made a hump on his back. Then he pulled on an old greenish-black Prince Albert he had bought that afternoon from a second-hand store in Tombstone, and surveyed the trousers that came with it. He turned them up a bit higher, then tried to picture himself in his mind.

Pinto and he were out on the desert some five miles from the ranch. It was growing dusk.

Taking a brown cap from his pocket, two sizes too large for his head, he drew it well down over his eyes; and a bandanna kerchief of red silk found its place across his chin. In his trouser pocket he made sure he carried some stout cord.

Straight was just commencing to enjoy himself.

He practiced walking up and down a stretch of sand, giving his feet a peculiar sliding motion and bending his stooped shoulders far over. The old sweater on his back added to the illusion and from a man topping six feet two in his socks, he seemed less than five and a half.

At nine-thirty, disguised thus, and eager for his first venture, he crouched outside the living-room window of the Robsin's home. The curtains were drawn only part way. It was a large rambling one-story ranch house with wide-windowed rooms running in all directions.

"Ole Jim" sat by his desk in the corner and Jean Robsin stood near the center of the room talking.

Thomas William could not make out what she said at first, but Robsin bellowed out words that made the other man ache to knock him down.

"Your mother's clothes will have to do," he roared. "Make them over for yourself if you need something to wear!"

"But I hate to cut up mother's things," the girl answered on the verge of tears. "I just can't bear to do it somehow."

"Bosh! That's a poor excuse," the man snarled. "Well, you'll get no money from me while there's stuff here to do with."

"My mother——" Jean began timidly.

"Left me in charge, young woman," Robsin interrupted rudely, "and a good thing she did too! You'll do what I say!" He brought his pudgy fist down heavily on the desk.

Jean Robsin turned and for the first time Straight had a good look at her.

She was a slim, graceful, blue-eyed girl about eighteen. Her skin was milk-white and there was something very sorrowful about her mouth. Her small hands kept nervously fingering the faded blue percale dress she wore. She started to answer her stepfather, then evidently thought better of it, and swiftly left the room.

Robsin got up and went to the door through which she had gone, locked it quietly and went back to his desk.

The man outside watched his every move thoughtfully.

He unlocked a drawer and took some papers from it, spread them out on the blotter before him; one slipped to the floor unheeded.

Straight came nearer the window pane and peered in curiously. He saw a five-thousand-dollar Liberty Bond on the rug at Robsin's feet. Roughly speaking, he figured there must be at least ten others lying on the desk.

Then Robsin went to an old easy chair by the fireplace, tilted it sideways and removed one leg, letting the chair down easily and returned to the desk. Very carefully, he extracted round tissue-wrapped objects and began counting, laying one atop the other noiselessly.

Thomas William grinned knowingly. Gold pieces! It would be a good night's work. A light went out in another room. He guessed Jean had gone to bed. He began to wonder how many other hiding-places Robsin had. Better not be in a hurry—wait a little and see what else there might be to find out.

But after counting some thirty or forty, Robsin put the tissue-wrapped discs back and returned the leg to the chair; gathered up his bonds, discovered the one on the floor, then locked them all in the drawer.

"Humph! Guess that's all he's going to count to-night," Straight ruminated to himself, and made certain of his revolver.

Robsin sat down on a wide couch made up like a bed in one corner, and took off his shoes, then suddenly he moved out of the watcher's vision, but in a moment he was back with a heavy nightshirt. He undressed slowly and just before putting out the light, placed a six-shooter on a chair near his head. There was a creaking of springs as he settled himself on the couch for the night. Fifteen minutes and he was snoring regularly.

Thomas William tried the window carefully, slipping his knife in at the lock. "Easy does it!" he muttered as he held it fast, then allowed it to slide over gently. The window went up without a sound and he stepped quietly into the room.

With the help of his pocket flash, he had Robsin's gun in a moment and had eased it out the window for safety. Then he leaned over the sleeping man, pressing his own revolver hard against his chest.

Robsin came to with a startled exclamation. "What the——" he began.

"Don't speak again till I tell you!" Straight whispered threateningly in his ear. "If you move, this gun o' mine's likely to speak, pronto. Understand? Nod your head!" The flashlight turned full on Robsin's face.

He nodded dumbly.

"All right. Now, do as I say and be quick! Get out of bed, go to your desk, sit down, get some paper and a pen." Thomas William's voice was a hoarse, croaking noise.

"What——" Robsin looked wildly around for his gun. Had he forgotten to put it in the usual place for the night? But a heavy pressure of Straight's automatic silenced him effectively. He obeyed. When he was seated, Straight directed:

"Now write what I say pronto!"

Robsin's hand trembled so he could scarcely hold the pen.

"To my stepdaughter, Jean Robsin, I give all my Liberty Bonds on this date . . . ."

Robsin's pen stopped abruptly.

Straight's revolver pressed into his side eloquently.

"And all the gold I have hidden in the leg of the old easy chair . . . ."

The pen stopped again.

Thomas William whispered. "Say! Do you want to die, Robsin, now?"

The other man shook his head.

"Then go on writing: because these things belonged to Jean's mother anyhow. When you finish that, *sign your name!*"

For half a second Robsin hesitated, then he obeyed.

Straight took the paper, scanned it carefully and approvingly, then put it in his vest pocket.

"Now, the bonds," he demanded quickly.

The other man searched vainly for a way out but there was none. When he had handed them over, Straight commanded: "Sit still!" then bound him, hands and feet, with the stout cord from his pocket and with a torn piece of sheet from the couch made a firm gag.

Going to the chair, he took leg and all. It was so heavy, it almost made him drop his gun.

Robsin tried vainly to see if he knew this man but only succeeded in glimpsing an outlaw with a hump on his back, as Straight unlocked the door and left the room, relocking it after him. The bound man tried to cry out but found he could not make a sound. Nor could he possibly move. He would have to wait for someone to find him in the morning. He wondered if any of the men would be in, or if Jean had anything to do with this outrage, as he squirmed back and forth only making himself more uncomfortable.

Thomas William made his way to Jean's room and almost frightened her to death. "Get up and dress!" he threatened and commanded in one breath. "I'll sit here in the dark and wait. Take everything you want, you're going to be gone a long time. But if you speak or make any noise, I'll shoot you dead!" He smiled mischievously in the darkness. He had never shot anyone in his life.

Twenty minutes later with her before him in the saddle, Pinto was taking them towards St. Davids as rapidly as possible.

When Mr. and Mrs. Yorke came from the office of the Justice of the Peace, Straight handed over a heavy package.

"Look this over on the train," he suggested slowly, "and just you two keep that little slip o' paper that Robsin wrote and signed, careful-like."

Jean Robsin Yorke, smiling now and happy, spoke to him. "You almost scared me to pieces, though now I'm thankful you did it, but what ever made you?"

Thomas William grinned sheepishly. "I'm paid good, Mrs. Yorke. I kept one thing out of each kind you'll find in that package, remember that. Now, I'm going to light out over to Mojave where I hear there's a real fine gold strike."

Yorke laughed. "You're welcome to anything I've got, but what made you do this for Jean and me anyway?"

To Jean and her husband, Straight's answer was enigmatical. "I sure do hate 'steps' and that's why," he said.

They are still wondering what he meant.

(What is your opinion of this story? See Page 168.)

SNAKES

THE three common venemous snakes in this country are the rattlesnake, the copperhead and the water moccasin or "cotton mouth." The rattlesnake is, of course, the most common and most numerous, and covers a greater range than the others. There are fourteen varieties of rattlesnakes, many of them resembling each other so much that the unitiated cannot tell them apart. They are the banded or timber rattler, of the eastern and central portion of the United States, the dog-faced rattler of Arizona and New Mexico, the green rattler of the Southwest, the horned rattler of the desert countries, the massasauga rattler of the central United States, the Pacific rattler, the pigmy rattler of the Southeast, the prairie rattler of the pairie countries, Price's rattler of Arizona, the red rattler of California, the Texas rattler, the tiger rattler of the Southwest, white rattler also of the desert countries, and the West massasauga rattler. The copperhead is found from eastern United States through the central well down into the southwest part of the country as far as Texas. The moccasin is a water snake entirely and is found in the southern swamps and waterways from Florida to Texas.

Although the three varieties of poisonous snakes do not look alike they have certain marked resemblances, the most pronounced of which is their big, flat triangular heads with their broad jaws and pointed noses, the two pits lying between the eyes and nostrils, the diamond-shaped markings on their skin, and, of course, their poison fangs. The fangs are not, as many suppose, the darting tongue that is nervously protruded from time to time. Instead they are two needle-like teeth, hollow and from an eighth to three-eighths of an inch long in the upper jaw. The upper mandibles being hinged, they allow the fangs to lie hidden in folds of flesh along the roof of the mouth. But when the snake strikes, the mouth is opened and the fangs are advanced. The venom, secreted in tiny glands at the base of each fang, is injected into the wound caused by the teeth, also by muscular action.

None of the three poisonous snakes mentioned here can strike effectively unless coiled, and none of them can "hurl" their bodies from the ground as they are popularly supposed to do. Indeed they cannot raise more than two-thirds of their own length from the ground even with their most violent effort, so consequently cannot strike an object at any greater distance than two-thirds their own length from the position in which they are coiled.

"If you are not an outlaw, why don't you take off your mask?"

THE SADDLE WOLF

A SIX-PART COWBOY SERIAL

By W. D. Hoffman

Illustrated by NICK EGGENHOFER

PART FOUR

Read in the opening paragraphs the complete details of what has happened, and go on with the story.

JIM McCORD, the youngest son of Job McCord, the owner of the Circle Bit Ranch on the Lavaca Range, comes back to his home range in time to discover that a disgraced army officer, Captain Banquette, is the brains and financier of a range war that, if not stopped, is sure to ruin all of the ranch owners on the Lavaca Range. Jim decides to use a disguise that he made famous in Utah, that of being the Saddle Wolf, a masked, phantom rider, so that he can fight this organized band of killer gunmen without fear of bringing destruction to the McCords because one of them is fighting the gunmen with some success. Banquette wants to marry Amy, Jim's sister. Jim warns Amy that Banquette is thoroughly dishonest with women, to say nothing of men. Jim, with the aid of three real cowboy friends, has captured and imprisoned nine of the outlaws in No Man's Valley, his friends remaining as guards. When Jim takes six of the nine outlaws to his canyon prison, he finds that his three friends have captured and held Mary Harrington; her uncle, Orrison of the Smithsonian Institute; and their two companions. Only Jim knows that Mary was at one time engaged to Banquette in Washington. Jim had warned this party of explorers not to go into that country, but they went regardless, and now he must hold them. Mary thinks the Saddle Wolf is her enemy. He can not let her leave and tell what she has discovered is going on in No Man's Valley.

When riding back to the Circle Bit, Jim learns from Clay Emerson, his best friend, that Amy is going to elope with Banquette anyhow. A moment later, Payday Jones, one of Jim's friends guarding No Man's Valley, rides up in a cloud of dust and says that Mary Harrington has given the outlaws three guns, and that a battle is going on in the canyon. If Jim does not go back, one of the outlaws may escape and bring help. If he does go back to fight, Amy may have time to elope with Banquette and ruin her life. Jim goes back, it being the better of two bad possibilities.

After a thrilling battle, Jim not only succeeds in quelling the revolt at the mountain jail, but also he is able to explain a few things to Mary Harrington, so that there is no chance of her repeating her disheartening act. However, Jim keeps his identity secret.

On his way to help his sister, the Saddle Wolf sees Amy and Banquette with several of the latter's men. By a master stroke of strategy, he captures the whole band. But he fails to take from Amy a gun that she unexpectedly has, and Banquette takes it. He manages to get away; so does Monkson, one of his men. Jim takes the rest of the prisoners to the jail and leaves them. He also leaves Amy with Mary.

He knows now that Banquette more than ever suspects what Amy knows, that the Saddle Wolf is the youngest of the McCords. Jim decides to beat Banquette back to Tipton, and so prove somewhat of an alibi. He does. But the Captain instructs Wichita Clare, his best gunman, to pick a fight with Jim. Clare, Jim knows, is wearing a breast plate. Jim is faster than Clare, as he has proved once, but the breast plate may make a big difference. Jim refuses to draw first against such a man as Clare. If Jim is killed, Banquette may be successful. Clare stabs for his gun. . . .

CHAPTER XXVII

Recruits

THE roar of a heavy Colt, and another, with a sharp metallic "zing" sandwiched in between, smote the ears alike of the fighters and the swiftly-backing spectators in the gambling hall. Jim McCord fanned the hammer of his triggerless gun for a shot on the heels of his first as the gaunt Wichita Clare, in freakish attitude of falling, strove to thumb the prong of his wicked instrument of hate.

It had all happened in an instant, and Jim McCord had calculated his objective well. By a hair his flashing wrist, hand and fingers had drawn and fired before the already stabbing paw of the outlaw; he had let his heavy charge of .45 lead go to the breast plate, knowing the missile would knock his man from his feet; he had heard the ring of metal almost on the instant of the roar of the killer's gun.

Accurately he had calculated the effect, for the impact of his lead against the outlaw's armor had thrown the murder bullet high. True to his surmise, Wichita Clare was a fanner too, and off balance from the initial slug, the gunman had not got into action for the second in time to balk the ball that drove home from McCord into Clare's shoulder at the arm socket. The killer's paralyzed wing let the Colt drop at his feet.

The cowboy's smoking pistol slanted downward on the man as he kicked the fallen weapon out of reach of Clare's free hand. He turned to Dallas Banquette.

"This man is a rustler and killer, Captain. I've been investigating a bit since I came; he's been leading the thieves that have been stealing your cattle and ours. Turn him over to the sheriff, will you? Come on, Clay; his friends will fix him up!"

Jim McCord backed out to the board sidewalk, affecting to be watching those in the Apache other than the Captain. With the Whip owner, he strode hastily toward the waiting horses.

"Whew!" ejaculated Clay, as they swung up. "That was some shooting! But why in sin, Jim, did you make that murdering devil Banquette think you didn't know he hired Clare to try to kill you?"

Jim McCord smiled grimly, as they jogged away in the aura of arriving daylight. "I'd have given a year's pay, Clay, to have been able to brand him for what he is. But it had to wait. After this shooting, it would have been war to the death against every McCord on the range if I'd let it out I know what I do."

"But, Jim, that murdering——"

"I know. He'll pay—handsomely. Not now. If I'd shown my hand to-night, he would have known I am the Wolf; I convinced him otherwise, by that little talk. If I'd have called him, I would have had to shoot him, or be shot. If I'd shot him, the range would have faced a scattered

band of renegades; there's a dozen or more at large yet, like Whales Daschield, Red Garcia, Monkson, Jose Archuleta, Coyote Ortego and Krouse. They'd scatter, leave the Wagon Rod, and operate on their own. Now we know where to put our hands on them! We've got to do it, *first.*"

Clay saw the point. He wanted to help, and Jim was willing. "We've got to work fast," affirmed the younger man, "while Banquette's still in that raiding notion. Let him raid; it'll keep him away from No Man's Valley for a few days, piling up his evidence against the Wolf. Let him. It won't matter to me if he fills Canyon Pintado with cattle; we'll get 'em all back. If the Wolf is blamed, he can stand it! He won't be idle, and there'll be a few less of the outlaw band every day. But first I've got to have help up at that jail."

Jim outlined his plan in detail. They would go home and get a few hours' sleep, the better to be able to go for days and nights at a stretch. "We'll be ready when Banquette starts his big round-up. Have you got a straight-shooting puncher you can trust?"

"Natchez Burke. I'll bring him."

"Good. I'll get Ed Slagel and Gip Pettus. Gip'll come over from the Box E. That's enough. How about those supplies?"

"They're in the Sink now."

"We'll take them out this afternoon. We'll double the guard at the jail, ready in case Banquette makes a rush. They'll hold off an army."

More plans were discussed, and they separated at the forks. The sun was well up. Jim rode to the Circle Bit. Mrs. McCord and Job were wild over the disappearance of Amy, but Jim did not dare reveal that she was safe, in his custody, for fear it would give them guilty knowledge of the activities of the Wolf. But he did tell them she had not gone with Banquette; she had probably ridden to the T Lazy S to see if she could help Amanda Underwood in her bereavement. He would look her up before the day was out. Then he went to bed.

Two o'clock that afternoon, Jim and Clay, with Natchez Burke, Ed Slagel, Gip Pettus and two pack horses, trailed through the powdery gypsum, borax and lava dust of the Sink. They had left the Circle Bit with word that they would locate Amy, and might be gone several days scouting for the missing cattle. They reached the grub cache in a hole in the lava rock by the spring, removed the slab covering, packed up, and continued toward the Diablos.

When the desert was crossed and the foothills were reached, Jim halted and made a brief talk, letting the three new recruits in on the secret, cautioning them against mentioning the name of the Wolf and Jim McCord in the same breath, even to the guards already in No Man's Valley. "You can call me the warden or the boss," he grinned. "It's the rule of the jail."

The three punchers, loyal to the core, entered into the spirit of the thing with enthusiasm. "But we're goin' to be sore if we don't git to smell powder smoke," declared Natchez. "This guard job looks too plumb tame!"

"You'll likely see a scrap before this job's done," the Wolf reassured them.

At the mountain prison, the cowboy chieftain, now masked, initiated the three recruits into their tasks, guard relief and double patrol at the outer and inner gates. He sent Ed Slagel with Payday and Utah into a neighboring canyon where there was a growth of piñon saplings that would serve as a stockade; the prisoners would be safe enough without the stockade unless there was a raid, but he was counting on a rescue move. Then he went into the inner canyon to see Amy.

She and Mary Harrington had taken over the task of cooking and camp management; two of the professors had spent much of that day in the old cliff-dwellings a half mile up the canyon; the other, Hudspeth, had remained behind to look after the girls, should anything happen. The masked rider drew his sister aside.

"How are you and Mary making it?" he asked her.

"Mary? My, you're familiar, Jim! Calling her by her first name — on such short acquaintance. Oh, we're getting

along first rate. She's a dandy girl, and she likes you."

"Likes me?" The Wolf's teeth flashed in a smile. "I believe she did say she thought a lot of Jim McCord, the cowboy who used his gun in her behalf down in Tipton. She knows you're Jim's sister. What did she say about me, anyway? You know it's that other me she likes, not the Wolf!"

"No, it isn't," declared Amy, earnestly. "It's not Jim McCord she's interested in. It's you, the cowboy in the mask, the Wolf. She scarcely asked me about my brother. But she never gets tired talking about the Wolf, asking questions, speculating on who you might be. She's convinced now you are a hero, holding these wicked men prisoners; she knows they are outlaws now. I had a great time evading her questions!"

"That's queer," mused the masked rider. "You didn't give her a hint the Wolf and Jim McCord are one and the same man?"

"Of course not, after what you asked me to do. But it isn't really queer, Jim, that she should be interested in the Wolf; girls always like romantic things, and you're a mystery. Womanly curiosity makes her almost die to learn all about you. Besides. . . ." Amy McCord hesitated, then went on, reproachfully.

"Jim, you never told me, your own sister, what you told Mary Harrington—about Dallas Banquette, about Nellie Wainwright. That's why Mary is so interested in the Wolf. She and you have things in common; both of you disappointed in love——"

"Let's not talk about foolish things, Amy. Forget it. Love talk sickens me."

"You sly rascal. You've got to listen. Mary told me her own secret——"

"And you told her yours?"

"Partly. Oh, I'm through with him forever, Jim! You needn't fear I'd ever consent to marry him again." Her gray eyes held in them the fire of one now completely disillusioned, wrathful at the man who had deceived her with honeyed words.

"If I thought you felt that way, for sure," said Jim slowly, "I wouldn't hold you here any longer."

"I want to stay here," declared Amy, hastily. "I am afraid of him—not physically afraid—but somehow his will seemed to dominate mine. It's foolish, I know, but I'm afraid he would try to hold me to my promise to marry him. I want to stay here, Jim, so that he won't seek me out and hold me to that promise."

"It won't be long, Amy," said Jim, grimly, and the eyes behind the mask hardened into agates. He had been considering releasing the professor's party, including the Eastern girl, now that Banquette had learned the location of No Man's Valley. Nothing the Orrison expedition would reveal could do much harm now. But Amy's plea changed his decision; he would hold the Easterners if for no other reason than to enable his sister to remain safe from the pursuit of Captain Banquette. This camp was her only refuge.

While he had been talking to his sister, the Wolf noted Mary Harrington's frequent glances in their direction. "She's really jealous," laughed Amy. "She never got done asking why you brought me here, and of course I didn't dare tell her I was your sister. She thought she was the special concern of the masked cowboy until I came; told how you had given orders she was to be protected and how you would see to it personally that she was cared for. Then when you brought her back to camp instead of trying to get fresh like other men, why, she thought you were a real Sir Galahad!"

"You've joked enough," said Jim, lightly, and returned to the tent. Amy had lagged behind. The Eastern girl was frigid, uncommunicative. The Wolf's even white teeth flashed in a smile. "You'll be free to go in a day or so. You don't hold it against me, very much, holding you here, do you?" he asked Mary Harrington.

"You wouldn't dare do it, if that girl's brother knew of it," she retorted, with sudden heat.

"He's that particular friend of yours, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. If you are not an outlaw, why don't you take off your mask?"

"Some day I will. Well, I must be traveling." He turned to his horse.

As he rose to the stirrups, he heard the girl's musical laugh. "Broken hearts are easily mended, aren't they?" she asked, smiling sweetly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, some of the things you told me—about Banquette. And already you are keenly interested in rescuing another girl from the Captain!" She glanced toward Amy.

"Broken hearts *are* mended easily," he said, slowly, and the eyes in the mask twinkled on her.

"Well, what do you mean by that?"

"Once there was a girl who came away out here to Arizona to forget the Captain, and before she was here a day she met a cowboy, young Jim McCord, whom she admits now is a *very* particular friend."

Before she could gasp her astonishment that the Saddle Wolf should know so much of her own history, the masked rider wheeled his mount and galloped.

In the box-canyon, he halted long enough to snatch a bite to eat at the guard camp. Then he rode with Clay Emerson out of the rock gate in the crimson sunset toward Lavaca range.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The Wolf Strikes

HALF an hour later the Wolf drew up sharply, gazed for a moment intently across the sand waste southward where Red Desert merged with the richer soil of the grazing lands. Clay Emerson had halted with him, and the two, after studying the skyline, exchanged meaningful glances.

"That spot of dust spells a bunch of riders," commented the Whip owner. "Banquette's getting into action early."

The Wolf nodded. "There's two spots, Clay. One farther westward; that bunch has the lead over the others of an hour or so. Looks like they were going to work the Whip and the T Lazy S. The others are heading south, towards the Box E and the O U Bar."

"Look—they're separatin'. See those specks dividing out from the main party! We got a job on our hands, Jim, to handle that scattered layout. What's yore idea?"

Jim McCord showed his teeth. "We'll take it easy—won't try to beat any of 'em to those ranch outfits. They'll come this way, every one of them, before the night's out, on the way to Canyon Pintado with what stock they steal." He replaced his dust muffler over nose and mouth, and the pair of whitened riders continued leisurely ahead through the desert.

Darkness came and the pair dismounted, resting their horses, letting them browse on the pods of screw bean. There was hard riding ahead of these sturdy mounts which had been well watered and fed in No Man's Valley. Jim and Clay were on the trail that cut the desert toward Pintado and the Diablos, the same trail over which had passed more than one herd of stolen cattle in the last fortnight. Others would be along before morning, they were satisfied.

"What's that light?" exclaimed Clay suddenly. "Circle Bit. It's getting bigger! By thunder, Jim, they've set you on fire!"

The Wolf's eyes narrowed; he gazed on the scene in the distance; flames were visible, mounting higher in the darkness. On the instant another faint glow burst on the range to southwest, in the direction of the Box E of Coot Eustace.

"Those devils got busy pronto, soon as they arrived," declared Clay. "We better start; we can make it to your place, anyway."

"No," decided Jim McCord. "From where that flame rises at the Bit, I'd judge it isn't the house, but the horsesheds; it's down in the draw and the house sits on the slope. We'll wait."

"They're shore building up a strong case against the Wolf," said the Whip owner, grimly. "It's a wonder they'd risk that, with men in the bunkhouse."

"There's only a few left. Besides, they started those fires to keep the hands busy while they strike somewhere else, at the cattle."

The minutes fled, the hour; there were no more fires. Killing time was tedious, but it would take until midnight at least for the nearest of the rustlers to get their stolen herds to this point. Jim outlined

his plan to Clay. The Whip owner demurred at his rôle, to guard the prisoners; he wanted to pitch in and fight. The Wolf pointed out that a lone rider would be able to do what he had planned; two might betray their presence prematurely. "Wait and see how it works out," he advised.

It was after twelve when the first suspicious sounds reached their ears from down the trail, and the moon revealed vague forms creeping over the range. Jim McCord donned his mask, mounted the gray, ghostlike Spookey. "Ride west, behind that sand hummock, Clay. Come out when you see me with another rider or two." The Saddle Wolf stepped his mount behind a brake of tree cactus, a screen he had carefully selected for that purpose.

Soon a rider took form in the silver haze, followed by a thin line of cattle. The Wolf let him pass; he estimated there were about forty head in the little herd. These were Circle Bit cattle, for the most part, nearest to the Diablos. Two men flanked the herd and one rode tail. When the last of the riders drew opposite, the masked phantom stepped quickly from the cactus thicket, his gun shining in the moonlight.

Without a word he stepped Spookey up to the rustler, whose hands were lifted, and appropriated his gun. The man was a Mexican.

"Call those two swing men back, hombre," ordered the Wolf, grimly. "I'll shoot you if you holler loud enough for that forward rider to hear."

"No sé, señor," croaked the vaquero in a low gutteral.

"You sabe, all right." The Wolf leveled his gun. The man's eyes rolled. "Talk, hombre, and don't call out like you are excited, either!" The masked rider repeated the injunction in Spanish. The vaquero called to the pair who had rounded the tangle of yucca and sotol.

"You stay right here." The Wolf was behind the tree cactus as the swing men jogged back. When they reached the vaquero, the Wolf stepped out, repeated the disarming act. Clay Emerson rode through the cactus.

Jim McCord was riding again, back of the trail, for a spot he had marked three or four hundred yards ahead. He reached the clump of tornillo growth there and waited for the point rider a brief minute. In another minute he had him.

He left the cattle to their own devices and hustled the trail boss back to the other three, all Mexicans but the pointer.

"Back of that sand dune is as good place as any for 'em, until we're ready to trail," said the Wolf. "There'll be more." The four prisoners were escorted a few hundred yards from the trail. "We'd better tie 'em, so you can come for the others." Jim helped a few minutes, then hurried back to his lair.

He waited an hour before the second batch appeared. These were driving a herd of several hundred; they were six in number. Banquette plainly had a large force in reserve, but the fact that most of them were Mexicans told the Wolf they were very recent recruits.

Jim McCord marveled that Captain Banquette should be so bold as to employ these renegades in such numbers and risk the secret in their hands. There seemed but one reasonable explanation; the Captain did not intend to remain on Lavaca range. He was a mere figurehead, anyway, Jim knew, acting for the syndicate. He was probably only a dummy owner of the Wagon Rod and the interest in the bank.

His work here would be done if he put over the irrigation scheme to the extent of getting the water rights. Since he was not known to have capital of his own, this seemed the only conclusion, though it was only surmise. If the theory was correct, Banquette might skip the country at any time, once the water rights were signed over in his name; it would be a simple matter for him to reassign them to the syndicate.

These six rustlers presented a harder problem than the four; the Wolf had to act swiftly before the favorable terrain he had selected was passed. He let the first four pass, then stepped out and cut off the two pushing the dregs. Clay had been watching and took charge of them promptly. The Wolf then picked on the

two in the center, shielded by the darkness and moon haze, detouring for a distance and appearing suddenly in the soft sand before them. Fortunately they were riding close, on opposite sides of the narrow line of cattle. The Wolf commanded them to stand still while the herd passed, then hustled them back to Clay. He broke away in the sand again. This time he was compelled to dash ahead a quarter of a mile before he found shelter alongside the trail.

When he stepped out before the pointer, the other rider, some forty feet behind, balked, raised his gun and fired. The ball struck the saddle horn, splattered. The Wolf was compelled to shoot the rustler from his horse. The other was handled in short order. The masked cowboy examined the fallen outlaw, who was slowly crawling to his feet. The Wolf's shot had grazed his temple; in a minute he was able to get on his horse. The two prisoners were conveyed back to join the others.

He waited an hour before the second batch appeared.

"Six and four makes ten," commented Clay. "Banquette can't have many more! I didn't dare leave when I heard the shooting—figured you'd be the one that would

do any that was done. Better start for the canyon?"

"There'll be more," predicted Jim, in a calm, steady voice.

There were; about three o'clock in the morning. Three outlaws came in sight with a little bunch of fifteen. The Wolf caught them at the tree cactus, the two trailers first, the pointer a few minutes later.

This left one more to come, if the masked cowboy's surmise was correct that each of the outfits would be visited that night. Before daylight they came, from Pat Halderman's O U Bar, most distant of the outfits. Four were in this bunch, and they were driving some fifty head. The Wolf got them, in pairs.

Sun-up found the Wolf and his assistant trailing over Red Desert for the Diablos. The wounded outlaw was little the worse for the cut at the side of the head, and able to ride, which made the task of transporting the captives a lot easier than it would have been otherwise. The cattle had been left to their own whim, and Jim knew they would head back to water before many hours. Seventeen rustlers, most of them Yaquis and Mexicans, rode gloomily in the van of their captors. Five were white men.

"Which of you is Whales Daschield?" the Wolf demanded, before the procession started.

"Whales ain't yere," grunted one.

"What's your name?"

"Orf Krouse."

Others were willing to talk. Jim learned that among his captives were Bill Millett, Red Garcia, Jose Archuleta and Coyote Ortego. They had been promised an equal cut on the stolen stock, Banquette taking nothing. Daschield and Monkson were still at large, with the Captain and the wounded Wichita Clare. Clare would not be able to do any damage for a matter of weeks.

During the morning the prisoners were delivered at No Man's Valley. The Wolf was not yet satisfied. "We'll do a little scouting around the Wagon Rod," he told Clay. "This time we'll do all of our work in daylight."

CHAPTER XXIX

Cutting Out

AFTERNOON saw the masked rider and his lieutenant in the cottonwood and willow bosque along Badger Creek, half way between the Wagon Rod and Tipton. Three miles northeastward, over the rolling range, lay the white ranch buildings of Dallas Banquette's establishment; in the distance, south, lay the crude cow town, hazy in a mantel of dust.

"There shore isn't much travel to-day to and from the Wagon Rod," remarked Clay with a grin. "Banquette's ranks have been a mite depleted. I wonder if he's found out yet what happened last night!"

"He won't find it out, likely," commented the Wolf, "until one of those few hands he's got in Pintado Canyon comes in. Then he'll learn that none of his rustlers, and none of his cattle, ever reached there last night."

"That looks like yore dad, Jim." Clay motioned toward the rider they had been watching for some minutes to westward. It was Job McCord, and no mistake, riding toward town. He would not pass this spot. The Wolf did not want to see him now; he was waiting for more prey from the Wagon Rod.

"Seems to me like there was a lot of folks riding into town this time of day," commented the Whip owner. "That was Bill a while ago, and we saw three, four coming up from the Mexican trail, Box E way. Something's going on in town."

"Maybe so. The folks will be making it hot for the sheriff, after the fires last night, and that rustling. Well, we'll stick here awhile longer. Hello, there's somebody!"

From the north, on the Wagon Rod trail over the open range, jogged two riders. They were at least two miles away, which was good news, for the Wolf did not want to tackle these two men with his father still within sight. Job McCord would be swallowed up by the dust haze toward Tipton before these two arrived.

The minutes passed. Jim did not fear that the riders would not come this way, the usual trail to town. As they neared,

he satisfied himself that neither was Banquette, although they were still too far away to be identified. They were from the Wagon Rod, which was sufficient. There may have been an honest cowpuncher or two attached to Banquette's outfit, but Jim McCord doubted it. If so, it would do them no harm to spend a few days in the mountain jail.

The trail was perhaps a quarter mile from the bosque where the Wolf awaited them. When the opportune time arrived, Spookey burst from the thicket and Jim gave warning of his approach with a shot from his forty-five.

The distance was too great for that shot to count except as a warning, which was what the Wolf desired. As the gray-white horse and rider galloped toward the pair, they broke and sank the spur.

This, too, was what the Wolf had counted upon. He had been recognized. Clay had remained in the bosque, awaiting the Wolf's signal. He might have joined in this pursuit and hurried the result, but Jim McCord did not want him to be seen in daylight in these operations, should someone suddenly appear. Spookey tore after the pair until they began to separate slightly. Both were streaking for Tipton. Jim had counted on one of the horses being faster than the other, and the lead rider was not holding back.

The one being left behind suddenly swerved off to the left, thus bringing about quickly what the Wolf had tried to accomplish. He wanted to separate them, take them one at a time, for in daylight the risk was too great for one man to give battle to two at long range; besides, it was unnecessary. The Wolf continued in steady pursuit of the forward rider; he saw the other back away abruptly and start on the return to the Wagon Rod. He would have to take the leader quickly.

He had remained out of range until now. The Colt he always used was of the longest barrel, made of the single action forty-five model—seven and one-half inches. It gave him longer range than the shorter barrels of the same make of gun more commonly used, and it gave him greater accuracy. If there was a sacrifice of speed over the five and a half and four and three-quarter models, Jim McCord had never sensed it. He was gambling now on the other man having a gun of lesser range, and fired. He did not fire to kill.

But long experience had taught him the elevation and he reckoned the windage, a minor factor with the heavy ball. The fleeing rider halted abruptly with a bullet through his hat, turned, and loped back toward his pursuer, hands held high. Clay Emerson had emerged from the bosque after following down stream, and a moment later the Wolf was streaking for the other rider.

The swift dust-covered stallion outran the outlaw's bronco two-thirds of the way to the Wagon Rod. The Banquette rider turned twice to fire, then halted at the insistent, accurate shot of the Wolf screeching within feel of his ear.

The Wolf brought him back in a hurry.

Came the wait for more prey, while the last of the captives talked and begged off. "No, I ain't Bill Millett; this other hombre is Bill, and I ain't Whales Daschield; he's comin' to town with the Captain pronto. I ain't got nothin' agin' the Wolf; my name's Sam Hurley, jest a new rider the Captain tuk on. If yuh let me go, I'll tell yuh what I know."

"You can tell it to the judge later."

"I will. I'm innercent. I know a mite, from hearsay. I'll tell yuh. I admire yuh a powerful lot—you got the whole crew corraled, looks like. Yeah, the Captain's guilty as hell. Hired that burnin' and rustlin'—the boys to git every head theirselves; he don't claim any; he wants the water rights, that's all. He guarantees the boys protection from the sheriff and they kin steal till the cows comes home. That's his deal. But the Captain's all het up. A rider come in from Pintado this mornin' and said nary a one of the boys ever reached the canyon last night, nor the steers nuther. The Captain's tearin' his hair, knowin' the Wolf has cleaned him out, all exceptin' us and Whales and Monk. That is, I ain't ever been hirin' out my gun or rope, nuther . . ."

He would have continued on indefinitely

but for the Wolf's order for him to dismount. Then he and Bill Millett were tied up, in a dense clump of undergrowth in the bosque. Jim and Clay rode out to the fringe of cottonwoods and willows and watched the trail.

Presently a second pair of riders took the distant crest toward the Wagon Rod. "One of 'em is Banquette," commented the Wolf, cheerfully. "The other is Daschield. There's going to be a scrap—Whales has a rep with a gun; the Captain can spray lead with that automatic and change elevation while he does it."

But Daschield, like most quick-fire gunman, used the shorter barrel, Jim surmised. When the two reached the right angle on the trail, he dashed out with a warning shot, bent on cutting out the hired gunman first.

The swift stallion gave a good account of himself, at safe distance, pressing the pair until Banquette, on the better horse, took the lead. The Wolf let him go, largely for sentimental reasons; he wanted to face Dal Banquette not as the Wolf, but as plain Jim McCord, whom the renegade officer had wronged. He worked Spookey in between the two riders, and then suddenly Banquette turned about to face him. Daschield, from the other end, did likewise. The Wolf found himself between two fires, dangerously near effective range. He quickly let a shot go humming toward the captain.

It was a chance shot, at the limit of his range, approximately five hundred yards; but the shot had a summary effect. Banquette wheeled, as though changing his mind, and dashed on toward Tipton. Perhaps he had other urgent schemes afoot in town this afternoon.

Daschield had fired twice, and the Wolf saw the last bullet cut the dust a hundred feet in front of him. The gunman's fire was falling short. The Wolf put a bullet through the man's big Stetson, following it with a second. Daschield yanked his mount about and raced back toward the Wagon Rod.

The Wolf touched the red stallion gently with the spur, and, as the horse rose, leap on leap, he drove lead through that same sombrero once, twice, three times more.

The outlaw quit.

Back in the bosque ten minutes later Jim and Clay considered their next move. They could not remain here for long, for Banquette would round up a few men in Tipton and perhaps spread a generel report that the Saddle Wolf was in the bosque. There was no reason to remain longer; all were rounded up but two or three minor offenders at the most, omitting the captain, Monkson and Clare.

Whales Daschield's thick, cracked lips opened in a sarcastic grin. "You got the wrong hombre," he hummed, meaningly. "You ort to got the Cap'n. He's in town this minute with the sheriff, startin' a posse—that's what me and him was goin' in fer. There's a big town meetin' from all around this afternoon to ketch the Wolf."

The masked rider exchanged glances with Clay, whose brow wrinkled in worriment. On the instant, in the direction of Tipton, Jim McCord saw a rider emerge through the dust haze. The man was traveling north at a furious pace, toward the bosque.

"He's only one," remarked the Wolf, dryly. "We'll wait for him."

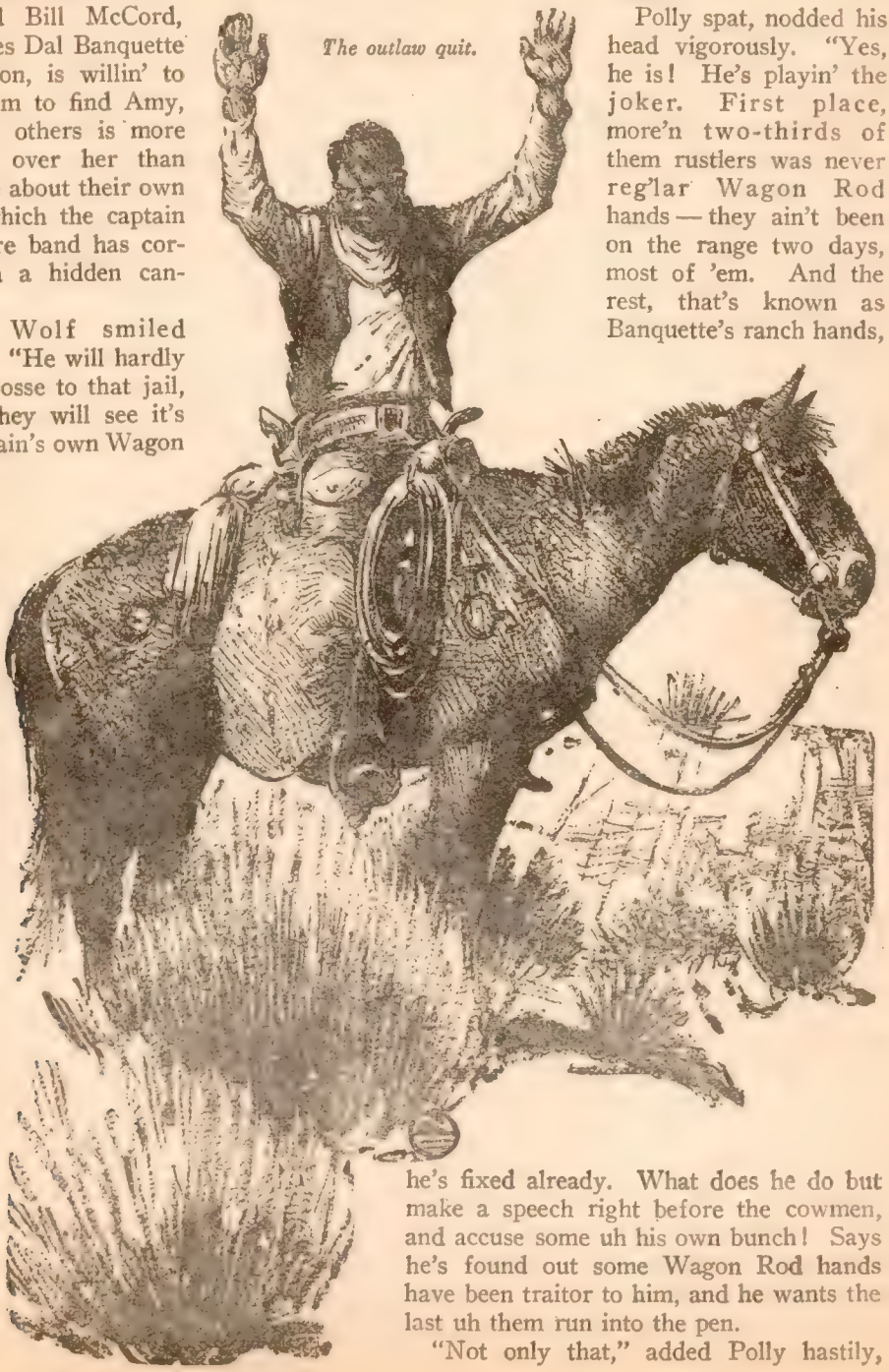
Within ten minutes the rider was leaving the trail for the dense undergrowth of the creek. "It's Polly Garver!" exclaimed Clay. "He knows exactly where to look for us—Captain must have told him."

Polly was piling from his hard-ridden mount. "You here, Clay! I knowed the Wolf was on the level! I was the on'y man in the mob that argied the Wolf was the cattlemen's friend!" The little puncher's eyes were starey wild. "Yeah, Banquette's got the whole range het up! He called this meetin' together in Tipton to start a big raid on the lair uh the Wolf; he claims he knows where yore hang-out is. I don't know who you are, but I know you ain't been burnin' out the ranches and rustlin', like Banquette says. He's got them all to thinkin' he's plumb anxious to stop the rustlin', and him and the sheriff is goin' to lead the posse right off. That's why I skinned out, soon as I heered him tell where you was, so I could put yuh wise!" Polly bit off a hasty chew of plug.

"And, oh, yes, that devil says the Wolf has captered Amy McCord and is holdin' her in the Diablos, and he knows where to lead the posse to find Amy and point out the stolen stock. Even Job and Bill McCord, that hates Dal Banquette like p'ison, is willin' to foller him to find Amy, and the others is more het up over her than they are about their own cattle which the captain says yore band has corraled in a hidden canyon."

The Wolf smiled grimly. "He will hardly lead a posse to that jail, where they will see it's the captain's own Wagon Rod bunch that are being held there, men like Chama, Ace Dineen and the whole gang. It would be a dead giveaway on him. He's likely to do that—I don't think!"

Polly spat, nodded his head vigorously. "Yes, he is! He's playin' the joker. First place, more'n two-thirds of them rustlers was never reg'lar Wagon Rod hands — they ain't been on the range two days, most of 'em. And the rest, that's known as Banquette's ranch hands,



The outlaw quit.

he's fixed already. What does he do but make a speech right before the cowmen, and accuse some uh his own bunch! Says he's found out some Wagon Rod hands have been traitor to him, and he wants the last uh them run into the pen.

"Not only that," added Polly hastily,

"but I got an idee he's fixed it with the sheriff to let the whole kaboodle out uh jail after they're locked in. Then they'll clean up the range proper, and Banquette will rule things with a higher hand than ever, startin' a bloody war, openly, and forcin' folks to sign over the crick rights, then skippin' the country——" He cut off abruptly. "Look! They're comin' now!"

An avalanche of dust rolled outward from the end of Tipton's street as a horde of riders raced toward the Diablo trail.

CHAPTER XXX

The Captain in Command

SATISFIED that the posse of cattlemen and townsfolk was actually on the way, the Saddle Wolf got into action quickly, unbound the first two prisoners and ordered the three to their horses. Polly Garver, the little puncher who had brought news of Captain Banquette's latest stroke, volunteered to accompany the masked rider and Clay Emerson, although he did not yet know the identity of the Wolf.

Jim McCord hesitated, for the fewer in his own band the better just at this time; but he wanted to be able to ride free the next few hours and he accepted the new recruit, who could help Clay get the latest captives to the Diablos. He started his little procession up the winding hollow of Badger Creek, keeping to the trees and the brush of the bosque just as much as was possible.

The posse was heading for the spot where the Wolf had put in an appearance; it was plain that Captain Banquette was directing the riders in pursuit of the Wolf. Yet Jim did not believe the renegade officer would lose much time hunting for him in the bosque; the Captain's object was to lead the party to No Man's Valley, as narrated by Polly Garver.

"You reckon he can find yore hidden canyon?" asked Clay, as they rode briskly forward.

"He ought to," replied the Wolf grimly. "He was just about there when he made that breakaway."

"You think it's wise to take these three prisoners there? In case that posse makes a general jail delivery, it would be better to hide these three out, wouldn't it?"

"We won't take 'em there, right off," informed the masked cowboy. "We'll see what we see."

After fifteen minutes the Wolf called for a halt at the big bend in the creek. Leaving Polly to stand immediate guard over the three renegades, Jim and Clay proceeded up the nearest rise. Looking back, they saw the possemen loping back and forth along the fringe of cottonwoods and willows, near where the Wolf had darted out to pursue Banquette and Daschield.

"Fine," commented Jim; "the time they kill there will give us that much more lead. But they won't stay long."

The pair went back to the others. "We'll leave the bosque here and hit for that big arroyo running west, then cut off along the rim of Gypsum Sink," the Wolf decided.

The cavalcade streamed from the creek bottom on the north slope of the rolling range, and after a time struck the dry wash that at certain seasons was a feeder for Badger Creek. The rocky floor of the wash enabled the riders to make good progress. They rode for an hour, occasionally following the flats between the broken ribbon of the wash, but up to now had made no effort to observe the actions of the posse. Presently the Wolf halted his party and rode to the crest of a barren loma.

He came back immediately. "They're headed straight for No Man's Valley," he told Clay. "Left the Pintado trail back there aways. How'd you and Polly like to take charge of these three? Ride up to where the Sink starts to fall away from Red Desert proper. Then follow just along the edge of the Sink, under the rim, so you won't be seen. In case you're discovered, ride into the lava banks and make for that spring. You'll be able to dodge 'em there."

"Where you going?" Clay wanted to know, a bit anxiously.

"I'm going to show 'em I'm in their rear." He did not explain further. "When you get to the crook in the big rim near

the foothills, halt and wait until you hear from me. If you don't hear, head down into the Sink—you know that hole, Clay." He turned Spookey and rode back along the arroyo.

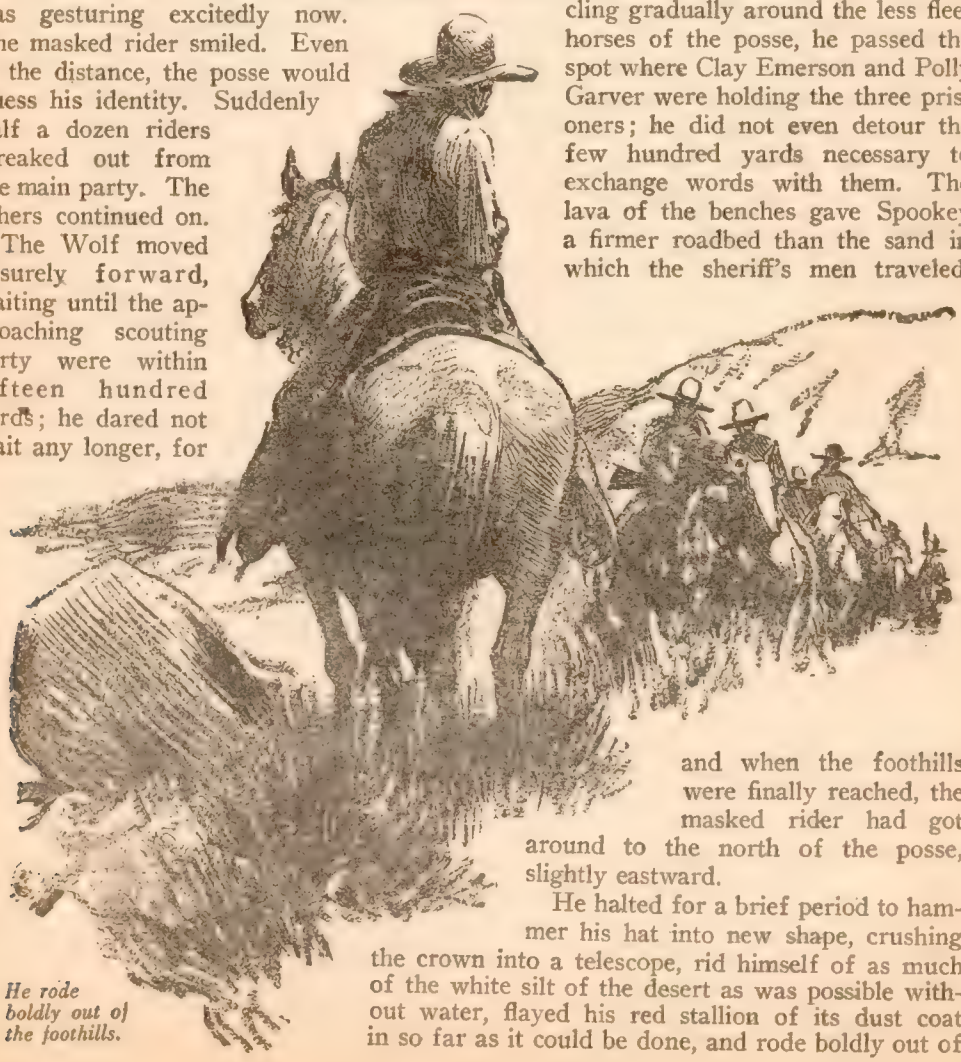
A short time later, the Saddle Wolf appeared on the open stretch where Red Desert's sand was beginning to replace the grazing terrain. He rode leisurely for a few minutes, perhaps a mile behind the possemen. They spotted him within a few minutes.

There was a hasty halt and a parley. Captain Banquette had been leading the riders since Jim sighted him from the rise some miles back. The renegade officer was gesturing excitedly now. The masked rider smiled. Even at the distance, the posse would guess his identity. Suddenly half a dozen riders streaked out from the main party. The others continued on.

The Wolf moved leisurely forward, waiting until the approaching scouting party were within fifteen hundred yards; he dared not wait any longer, for some of these man had rifles. But his object had been accomplished; they would know positively he was here. Then he turned the stallion and galloped back in the direction of the distant bosque.

He had no intention of returning to the creek, however, but dropped into the arroyo, and then sped west and north on the rock floor of the wash.

As the afternoon advanced, he pressed the fleet stallion to the utmost, beyond the dry wash, to the glaring white waste of the Sink, along the edge of the great depression. He skirted the desert plain where it fell into a series of terraced benches, keeping just under the rim. Circling gradually around the less fleet horses of the posse, he passed the spot where Clay Emerson and Polly Garver were holding the three prisoners; he did not even detour the few hundred yards necessary to exchange words with them. The lava of the benches gave Spookey a firmer roadbed than the sand in which the sheriff's men traveled,



He rode boldly out of the foothills.

and when the foothills were finally reached, the masked rider had got around to the north of the posse, slightly eastward.

He halted for a brief period to hammer his hat into new shape, crushing the crown into a telescope, rid himself of as much of the white silt of the desert as was possible without water, flayed his red stallion of its dust coat in so far as it could be done, and rode boldly out of

the foothills unmasked, as plain Jim McCord.

He jogged leisurely toward the approaching horsemen, as though man and horse were greatly fatigued from a long scouting expedition, which was in a way true. As he neared the posse, he observed that Captain Banquette was still setting the pace. Affecting surprise at the presence of the big party of more than a score of riders here, he stiffened his gait slightly.

So far as he could judge, the half dozen possemen who had turned back to pursue the Wolf had not rejoined the main body. He was satisfied that these riders would judge it an impossible feat for the Wolf to have got north of them, which would have been true but for his superior mount. As he met the riders he drew up shortly.

"What's the excitement?" he wanted to know, addressing the sheriff.

CHAPTER XXXI

At the Prison Gate

"I'LL answer that question, McCord." Captain Banquette turned for an instant toward the nearest rise of the foothills, where a rider had suddenly burst to view, coming from the direction of Canyon Pintado. The Wagon Rod owner wheeled his mount toward the newcomer, galloped out to meet him. For but a few seconds, the rider halted to exchange a subdued word with the Captain; then he turned his bronco back into the foothills.

Job McCord and Bill had pushed their horses through the bunched posse toward the son and brother. "Where's Clay?" Job asked quickly. "Did you two find any trace of Amy?" It was on the previous afternoon that Jim and Clay had ridden from the Circle Bit leaving Job McCord with the impression they would look for both the stolen cattle and the missing girl.

"And did you see anything uh the Wolf?" blurted Bill. "He's got Amy—and that's what this posse is after—to run down the Wolf and find Amy."

Captain Banquette had returned swiftly, taking his place again at the head of the riders, facing the youngest of the McCords.

"Amy's all right, Dad." The son's gaze went from his father to Banquette, whose prognathous jaw locked bulldog fashion as he met the eyes of the younger man. "She's joined a scientific party with Professor Orrison and his niece," continued Jim, easily, "and will be back in Tipton with them in the morning." He intended to make this promise true later that night by escorting the campers to town himself, thus balking a prolonged search for Amy. All of this depended, however, on the results achieved now.

"Why in time did she do a thing like that!" exclaimed her father, much relieved, yet not altogether satisfied. Banquette had seemingly changed his mind about doing the talking; he was satisfied to stare level-eyed on his former Military Academy student and to listen.

"I reckon she must have sent word to you, and it miscarried," said Jim, lightly. "She and that Eastern girl, a Mary Harrington, took a great liking to each other." He met the even gaze of the renegade officer; Banquette, he knew, would not dare tell that the Wolf had taken Amy McCord from his own custody. The Captain broke silence now:

"You came down from the Diablos, McCord. From just where?"

"That's my business, Banquette. You saw me riding from Pintado way, Sheriff. I'm glad you're here; if you go back with me to the canyon, I'll point out a bunch of the stolen stock." He knew that part of the cattle were still in the canyon; had been there since that day when he had first taken Ace Dineen; and other little bunches had been driven there since.

"We're not going to Pintado, McCord," drawled the Captain. "We're on the trail of Amy McCord and the Saddle Wolf."

"I saw the Wolf," announced the cowboy, quietly, turning to the sheriff and the band of possemen behind the man wearing the star. "The Wolf is a friend of the cattlemen. He's just about cleaned the range of the rustlers."

"Burned the Circle Bit and Box E horse-sheds," sneered Banquette. "You seem to know considerable about the Wolf, McCord."

"I do, and I absolutely vouch for him."

"Come on, boys, we'll have a look." The Captain put his horse in motion, and the cavalcade started.

Jim McCord swung about in front of them. "You going to let me lead you to those stolen cattle in Pintado canyon?" he demanded.

"Take your choice, gentlemen," called out Banquette, blandly. "Go with young Jim here and find a handful of stock, or follow me to the hidden gorge where the Wolf's got the main herd and where Amy McCord is being held a prisoner. I know what I'm talking about from conversation I overheard among some of my own hands —cowpunchers turned thieves to rob me and you. What's your wish?"

The posse with one voice wanted to be shown the mystery gorge first. Even Job McCord and Bill were willing to go there now and to Pintado later.

Jim McCord shrugged, and fell in beside his parent. He might have persuaded Job and Bill to change their minds, but he realized the futility of trying to turn the posse aside.

There was the meager chance that Banquette could not find the cracklike entrance to No Man's Valley, since it lay behind the upended granite shafts and spars guarding the foothills. Since the afternoon was all but gone, the Captain might not find the place before dark, which would be something gained.

But Banquette had accurately marked the weird rock formations on the foothill slopes, even though he had had only moonlight to guide him when being led there a prisoner two nights before. Luck, too, was with the Captain, for when he led the posse around a pair of the sentinel rock towers near the mountain, he was directly in front of the crevasse that was the outer gate of the canyon jail.

Jim McCord had trailed along with the riders without comment. To have attempted to lead the posse away from Banquette's goal would have been futile. Yet the mind of the cowboy had not been idle. His eye was first to detect the thin black tube that slowly was thrust over the rock shelf above the gate; he knew it was a rifle, in the hands of Jerry Teague, Utah or Payday Jones.

In a moment, as the Captain set a brisk pace forward, the barrels of a pair of smaller weapons appeared—forty-five revolvers; then two more. The gate was well guarded, for Natchez Burke, Gip Pettus and Ed Slagel were in the box-canyon with the faithful three.

There would be bloodshed within a few minutes if Captain Banquette attempted to storm the entrance and to run the rock passage; innocent cattlemen, cowpunchers and townsmen would suffer. Knowing their mood, Jim realized the possemen would fight to the last ditch to get into that hidden gorge.

A hundred feet from the crevasse the Captain halted. "Gentlemen, this is the place! Through that narrow passage you can see some of the rustlers moving about. We'll go in, on the jump!" He sent his mount forward. A menacing voice from the crevasse rose above the hoofbeats on the rocky ground:

"Halt, or we'll drill you to a man!" It was Jerry Teague.

Jim McCord's fleet stallion spurted past the sheriff and Banquette, wheeled sidewise and stopped suddenly, in the path of the Captain. The cowboy leaned from the near side of the saddle, and his incisive, crisp tones were loud enough for both guards and possemen to hear:

"You can't go in there, Banquette. My orders. I am the Wolf."

CHAPTER XXXII

Without Mincing Words

CIRCUMSTANCES had forced the admission of his identity before he was quite ready; yet the Wolf was aware that the chief reason for his disguise—safety for those against whom the outlaws would take vengeance—had been largely removed. With all of Banquette's real gunmen in leash except Monkson, Jim did not fear for the fate of the McCords. He would take care of Monkson and, when the time came, the renegade Captain.

Jim's hand had flashed to his holster, his gun had leaped from his hip, with the

words, "I am the Wolf." The barrel rested level on the cashiered officer of the army, whose sudden reaction to the announcement warned the cowboy the man intended to draw. Jim had had the advantage, being forewarned; had beaten Banquette not wholly on an equal footing, he realized; but now was no time to placate.

After he had spoken, he would give the Captain his opportunity. As the riders tensed to his words, the gun of the Wolf swept to left and right for an instant, by way of warning. He had no quarrel with these men, but he realized his confession had for the moment branded him a criminal, even among his old neighbors.

He hastened now to clear away the stigma attached to the name of the Wolf, his gaze focused upon Banquette, yet encompassing within the range of vision the line of riders behind the Wagon Rod man. "I've operated as the Wolf to round up the rustlers and gunmen employed by Captain Banquette," he said, evenly. "That canyon holds practically all of them—men the sheriff wouldn't arrest."

The renegade officer sat for a moment unmoving, intent eyes on his accuser. The Wolf was watching him; he paid little heed to the others now, for his words would give them food for thought.

Monkson was not with the posse, a fact that had caused Jim to wonder. As for the others, he doubted that there was a whole-hearted partisan of the Wagon Rod owner among them, unless it was Sheriff Tip Pruitt. And the law officer was not made of the stuff to risk the draw with the Wolf. Jim McCord holstered his weapon smoothly, having delivered himself briefly and to the point; he awaited the Captain's pleasure.

Banquette's eyes dropped to the sheathed gun, rested there for a long moment, as though he were debating whether the time had come to teach his former pupil what he knew of small arms practice. Jim's action in putting up his gun had been a silent challenge, on the heels of his direct accusation that branded Banquette for what he was, the king of the renegades. In the strained crisis of the moment, in which the two men faced each other with weapons fairly holstered within equal reach, none of the possemen stirred or uttered a sound.

Suddenly the Captain shrugged, laughed easily, and his attitude told that he had not refused the defi through fear. He turned to the sheriff's volunteers.

"I have no quarrel with any of the McCords; it was my suggestion that we come here to find Jim's sister. The young man is trying to dramatize himself. I don't believe he is the Wolf. We left him behind back there more than an hour ago. The other night while the Wolf was operating up here, Jim McCord was in Tom Jordan's place."

"How'd you know the Wolf was operating up here the other night, Banquette?" queried the cowboy, meaningly.

"I heard of it afterwards——"

"You heard of it *then;* you saw the Wolf; you lost a bunch of your rustlers on that occasion; you were being brought here yourself and got away—that's how you knew the location of this canyon jail, Banquette." The Wolf's teeth flashed. "You've been hiring all this rustling done; you brought your gunmen here to terrorize the sheriff and the range, to force a sale of the creek rights. You hired that burning of the ranch buildings last night, Banquette." Jim did not remove his gaze from the man he incriminated.

"Sounds phoney to me," grunted the sheriff, turning to the crowd. "But that ain't what we come here for, to listen to an argument between young Jim and the Captain. We're here to git back them stolen cattle and to find Amy McCord. It's our job to rush that there canyon before dark, and we ain't got much time to spare. Them rustlers standin' guard won't dare fire on my star, nor they won't fire on you all, knowin' if they did they'd swing. Come on, they'll surrender and take their medicine."

He advanced a step, halted again; his attitude, Jim saw, was one of bravado rather than of genuine courage. Pruitt had always been a light weight, a local feed dealer whose election had been a political accident. Jim continued to block the trail between two spires of rock; he

had no thought now of yielding to the sheriff.

Captain Banquette squared about slowly to face the posse. "Gentlemen, Jim McCord's got his facts tangled, that's all. Look at me; is there a man here who would say Dallas Banquette would stoop to low theft of this sort, one able to buy out the Wagon Rod and the bank? It's preposterous. I tell you I've been tricked myself—by my own men. Would I have come voluntarily before you to accuse my own men, if I had been guilty of hiring them to steal your stock? It's preposterous!"

There were faint murmurs of assent and the shaking of heads affirmatively. In spite of the Captain's unpopularity, he seemed to have the better of the argument on this one point of accusing his own men. Yet most of the cattlemen and their punchers were in doubt; they liked Jim McCord, though admittedly he had been a reckless kid in the past. Coot Eustace, whose Box E feed shed had been burned the previous night, voiced the sentiment of most of the cowmen contingent:

"If yo're on the square, Jim, and got those rustlers corraled, you won't kick on us goin' into that gorge and totin' them off to the reg'lar jail, recoverin' our stock at the same time."

CHAPTER XXXIII

An Arrest

"SORRY I do object," said the cowboy, "so far as delivering these prisoners over to the sheriff is concerned. As for the cattle, you can drive them away in the morning." He turned to his older brother, sitting his horse beside Job McCord.

"Bill, ride back to the bend where the rim of the Sink crooks off westward, about two miles, and bring Clay Emerson; tell him to come with his three prisoners and Polly."

Clay Emerson would be able to add verification to his story. As Bill turned without objection from the posse, the Wolf narrated in detail the events of the last few days, omitting all reference to the affair between Banquette and Amy, also the Captain's personal history involving the girl in El Paso. He told how he had come down from Utah and run into some of the same band who had terrorized the range there; cited his various raids after driving the main herd into No Man's Valley from Canyon Pintado. He gave an account of the taking of the prisoners, singly and in little bunches.

He repeated the words of Ace Dineen, offering to get him a job as one of the Captain's gunmen; told of the capture of Chama and the incident of the jammed gun at the killing of Henry Underwood, the gun which Chama later had shown was his.

"Now," he concluded, "we've got these men corraled, and we intend to keep them here. They're not going to be taken to the rattletrap jail in Tipton where they might by force of numbers make a general delivery; not counting that Banquette's money might bring in more men to raid the jail. These outlaws will stay here until the sheriff shows he's able and willing to handle them; until no juryman will be in danger of assassination from others."

"We've heard enough. Arrest Banquette, Sheriff!" The voice was that of Pat Hardeman, red-headed owner of the O U Bar.

"Hooray for the Wolf!" called another, and the cry was taken up by others of the posse. The Captain had remained erect on his horse, facing Jim McCord but risking no overt move for his gun. It was not because he feared the younger man whose gaze never wavered from him; he had heard certain news from the rider who had come from Pintado canyon a short time before, news that gave him his cue for his surprising action now.

"I'm willing to submit to arrest, Sheriff, until this thing is cleared up. I'll go back, go to jail or give bond, just as you say, and await my chance to clear my name. You men can do as you wish, of course. But I'd like to ask the Wolf a question. When are you going to take your father and brother to Amy, Mister Wolf?"

"No objection to answering that, Banquette. Amy will be taken back safely to the Circle Bit this evening."

"You'll have to hurry, McCord," remarked the Captain, dryly. "Well, Sheriff, I'm ready!"

Tip Pruitt was confused and indecisive; he awaited expression from the crowd, and got it. "Take him in, Sheriff," barked Coot Eustace, "and don't free him on bond. If Jim McCord's right, there's apt to be a murder charge, growin' out of Henry Underwood. If Chama killed him, he was paid to do it."

"I don't like the idee of leavin' these here other rustlers in this canyon," grunted the sheriff, but he found sentiment was with the Wolf, particularly after Natchez Burke, Ed Slagel and Gip Pettus put in an appearance on the rock shelf over the canyon gate. The mountain jail would be safer for a big band of prisoners than the inadequate headquarters below. Coot Eustace and Pat Hardeman volunteered extra guards, but they were not needed. "Besides," Jim told them, "there's a job to be done at Canyon Pintado. There's some cattle there yet that we haven't had a chance to round up."

That appealed to the posse, and although darkness was approaching, they decided to look after Pintado forthwith. Clay Emerson arrived with Polly Garver and the three prisoners, the most notorious of whom was Whales Daschield. Seeing the posse, Daschield promptly offered to turn state's evidence against the Captain.

The sheriff had taken the renegade officer's gun, and in company with his deputy, Hess Beadle, and two volunteer cowpunchers, started toward Tipton with the prisoner. Jim McCord had misgivings about trusting Banquette in the sheriff's care; No Man's Valley would have been a safer jail for him.

"What about Amy?" Job McCord wanted to know, as the riders under Coot Eustace moved away toward Pintado.

"You ride along with the bunch, Dad. I'll send Bill back home with her, right off. She's in there with that party of Easterners. Bill, you come along with Clay and me. We'll take in these three prisoners and then find Amy."

The elder McCord, breathing a prayer of thanksgiving, loped off in the direction taken by the other riders. With Bill McCord, Clay and Polly Garver, the Wolf escorted the prisoners to the passage in the wall of the mountain. Payday Jones appeared in the faint light of the entrance.

"I didn't want to mention it, Jim, when that bunch was waitin' out there, fear it would look funny she not bein' here when you promised to see she got home pronto. But them two girls and them three perfessors dusted out this mornin'."

"Dusted out?" asked the Wolf, quickly.

"Yeah. Seems they started to pack up part uh their stuff, but decided to leave it the last minute, and climbed onto their horses and skiddooed up the canyon to that slope on the west side and climbed up towards the ridge. Utah he couldn't stop 'em, not wantin' to shoot, and bein' afraid to leave the inner gate for fear them rustlers would make a break——"

"Take these fellows, Payday," cut in Jim, quickly. "Clay, you and Bill go with me." They rode through the box-canyon.

Darkness was enveloping the hills, obliterating the last faint glow of the twilight on the peaks; the canyon itself was already enshrouded with the deeper gloom of night. As Jim rode with Clay and Bill McCord, having left Polly to add to the guard, he was beset with grave fears for his sister and Mary Harrington. The professors had left willingly enough; had escaped via the eroded slope of the canyon where Chama had taken Mary two days before. Amy had no choice but to go with them. But while they had left willingly, they were ignorant of the task they faced back in the untrailed Diablos.

Even these things, however, caused the Wolf less concern than the peculiar, mysterious words of Banquette warning Jim he had better hurry if he were to get Amy home that night. The cowboy recalled now the appearance of the rider from Canyon Pintado who had talked for a moment with the Captain and then ridden away. Could that member of Banquette's band, one of the two or three still at large, have brought news to his chief that Amy had been found and captured?

(To be continued in the next issue.)
(Do you like this serial? See Page 168.)

THE HITCHIN'-RACK

A Get-Together Department for Our Readers

Come on, folks. Tie your hawsses to THE HITCHIN'-RACK. Perhaps later on there will be a letter waiting for you in the post office—a letter from a cowboy who rides the herd at night dreaming of some girl back East—or from a Texas ranger doing his bit along the Mexican border—or from some buckaroo in Oregon cooling his heels on a corral fence.

Letters must be addressed to THE HITCHIN'-RACK — if intended for publication in this department. If you want to open up a correspondence with someone, state this clearly in your letter, together with your name and address, and you will receive your answers direct.

This department cannot be held responsible for statements made by letter writers.

Do not send any money to strangers.

A stamped and addressed envelope must be enclosed.

PARAGRAPHS FROM THE EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

The Story of This Month's Cover

OUT of a draw dashed a horseman, galloping hard. He saw a pile of boulders a hundred yards to his left. In a moment he had ridden behind them, flung himself from his mount, and crouched in a position of readiness, facing the draw.

He had no sooner taken up his position of defence than he heard the sounds of hard riding. Two men came out of the draw. They did not see him, so they drew rein. There was no indication that they had any intention of riding further, unless they got some clue as to where the man they were chasing had gone.

The man pursued fully intended to fight it out. He had lost enough cattle to these two range bandits.

Our cover this month, done for us in oils by Elliott Dold, is more a picturization of the spirit of the shooting branch of the cowboy arts than it is anything else. This cowboy has been doing some target shooting and he is evidently well pleased with the results. He has been crashing through with some plumb-center shots. It is not a coincidence that he has been shooting at a tomato can, for this is their favorite target. When at a good range, if he can make a tomato can hop six times in quick succession, he feels mighty good. He knows that he is all set for anything that may happen.

The average cowpuncher is a highly-trained worker He must be proficient in riding, roping, shooting; in fact, be an all-around man. Not the least of what he must be able to do is shooting. The situation outlined above is not at all far-fetched. It may happen to any rider of the range, any man engaged in the profession of punching cattle. Cattle are valuable animals, and there are many men who would like to own a lot of them without going to all of the trouble of getting them honestly. If the cowboy who owns them, or who takes care of them, wants to keep them, there may often come the time when he will have to fight. He must be ready, or he will lose not only his cattle but also his life.

In the February issue of COWBOY STORIES, Major G. W. Lillie (Pawnee Bill), who is now acting as our authority on things Western, said that a cowboy must be a good shot, and that this can only be accomplished by practice. He said a great deal in a few words.

Cowboys like peace as much as anyone. But they know that one good way of getting it is to be able to shoot so well that no one is likely to try to make trouble. What was in the target held by our cowboy on this month's cover, surely relieved some cowboy throat, parched and burning with stinging bits of alkali dust; and what is through the target, is a very good indication that he is ready and able to ward off the untimely occupation of a 6 x 3.

—☼—

J. EDWARD LEITHEAD, Author of "Ridin' Revenge"

FROM the very moment that Gratton Stockett comes to Gila Crossing cow camp, until the end of the story, where he is driven back to the Crossing by Sheriff Hickson in a wagon, you will know that you are reading a complete cowboy novel that is written by a man who has seen and knows so much of the real West that he cannot go wrong when it comes to telling about it. Stockett is as live a character as you will ever find. He was a cowboy, but became a blackleg when he found out that he had a special gift for gambling. When the situation demanded that Grat assume his old rôle of being a cowboy, he proved that, once a cowboy, always a cowboy; that is, if a man is a real one to begin with. You will like Dolly Erath, too. But you will be completely absorbed by the stirring action of this splendid yarn. You will always remember the code of the cow camps, and you will never forget that it was a real, living thing, never to be forgotten or left unpractised by the type of cowpuncher that made the West.

—☼—

SCOTT HAUTER, Author of "The Fencin' of the Window-sash"

EVERYONE who is interested in the West, knows that at one time there was a lot of discussion, in fact, a lot of fighting about the question of fencing. More than once the argument assumed proportions that were deadly serious. Perhaps the trouble still goes on in some out-of-the-way places, but the main part is over. Not so with Jake Baum, president of the Window-sash Land & Cattle Company; Capital, $500,000.00. He decides that the Window-sash Ranch must be fenced. Scott Hauter is the only man who could tell about this situation, and do it adequately. Turn back and read this yarn, and then take off your hat to Scott Hauter and his Boothill Boggs.

—☼—

GLENN A. CONNOR, Author of "Ivory, the Horse of Horses"

THERE is a lot that we could say about Glenn A. Connor and his treatment of this yarn. But there is something that we think you would rather know about and see. It is an interesting letter, especially so considering the cover on the November, 1926, issue of COWBOY STORIES. The letter follows:

HAROLD HERSEY, *Editor*,
ACE-HIGH and COWBOY STORIES,
799 Broadway, New York City.

Dear Mr. Hersey,

Thank you for the privilege of informing you on the question of shoeing horses. According to my experience the subject stands about as follows:

Very few of the horses that compose a cavvy on a round-up are shod. Considering that each rider has from six to fifteen horses in his string, it is unnecessary. But where an animal is more or less constantly under a saddle it is necessary that he should be shod, most particularly those we term year-around horses.

During the snowy months of winter the shoes are pulled off. This because they ball up with snow and are far worse than no shoes at all. In the fall and spring "neverslips" are used. "Neverslips" are calked shoes, the calks screwing into the shoes so that they can be replaced when they become worn off. In the summer months "plates" (shoes without calks) or "mud shoes" (shoes with blunt calks) are used. The former are the most popular with the riders in my section of the country. But where much mud is to be contended with the latter are preferable.

There are what are known as the malleable and the steel shoe. In my opinion the light, saddle-horse grade, steel shoe is much to be preferred. This is the shoe you will find generally in use.

As for the horse-shoer being a well-known figure in the West, any qualified cowboy is capable of shoeing, under any conditions and circumstances that offer. The shoes, somewhere near the proper size, and nails are the only requisits he needs. His pocket-knife for a hoof parer, and a round stone or the butt of a six-shooter answer the purposes of a hammer.

The job may not have the neat appearance of the professional blacksmith, but it usually shows a greater tenacity to stick. I have seen such work stay on the horse's hoof until it was necessary to pull it and reset the shoe.

Any time you desire any information that is within my scope don't hesitate to call on me. Remember the saying, "A cowboy is always loyal to his outfit." This is truer than you may think. I am riding for the Clayton outfit. I dare you to put my loyalty to any test.

Ever yours,

GLENN A. CONNOR.

FROM OUR READERS

(Letters of Opinion and Comment)

PLUM PUD

Dear Editor:

I have only been reading "Cowboy Stories" since July as I did not know there was such a magazine. By the stories appearing in them now, sure reckon I have missed some good stuff. "Cowboy Stories" and "Ace-High" are what us Aussies call plum pud. Here's hoping you have a cheerful Christmas.

So long,

CHARLES HEBERT.

Kangaroo St., Kooringa, South Australia.

GOOD STORIES

Dear Editor:

Now I am gonna snub my hoss to your hitching-rack and I've got a pretty wild hoss too, 'cause she was raised out in the West. I came from the West. I used to live 35 miles north of Wolf Point, out on the reservation. But three years ago my parents moved away and I had to move with 'em. But I sure like Montana lot better than North Dakota. I spent plenty of my days in the saddle and it ain't hurt me yet and never hurts no one. But I've got to climb out of the saddle and go to high school. But next spring I'll be back in the saddle again. You sure publish some good stories. Best I've ever read and I've read plenty. My chief sport is hunting ducks. The old shotgun and my horse and dog are about the best pals I ever had. I'm Jack-of-all-trades and master of none. I've always longed to be back West again, but never been able to go back. But reading your "Cowboy Stories" make me feel like I'm out West again. The stampedes Wolf Point puts on are pretty good. I was in Mile City one summer and I took in the stampede. It sure was good. I would like to ride in some of those stampedes. But although I am a good rider I haven't enough faith in myself. I spent eight years on a ranch in the wildest part of Montana. There's where I learned to ride. I break all my own saddle horses, and some of them try to break me.

Wal, here's hoping your "Cowboy Stories" every success.

Yours from the West,

Palermo, N. Dak. (MISS) B. FRENCH.

A WESTERNER

Dear Editor:

Having read your stories in December magazine, I wish to say that they are a fine lot of life-snapping stories. As for myself, I am a Westerner, born in Delpine, Montana, and lived in the West 17 years, often wished I could be back there again, with the old cowpunchers I knew. I never got much schooling, being I have had 5 miles to go to school. The East is too tame for me; I like the good old Montana range. I am moving to Rochester, N. Y., in about one week, to 163 Roxborough Road, Rochester, N. Y.

I remain,

W. STEWART.

Box 74, Russell, Ontario, Canada.

CAN'T BE BEAT

Dear Editor:

Thank you very much for publishin' the letter I wrote you from San Francisco. For up to date I have received 69 letters from boys and girls, mostly girls, from all over the U. S. and Canada, and believe me they sure cheer up a waddie that is 26 miles from town and batchin' with only cows, coyotes, mountain lions and a bronc for company. If at any time Western songs please, let me know as I know lots of them. Hoping to see all letters in the "Hitchin'-Rack."

Yours to a stand-still for "Cowboy Stories" (they can't be beat),

TED C. MORGAN.

c/o Lee Price, Sonora, Calif.

ONLY REAL COWBOY MAGAZINE

Dear Editor:

Sorry but I just can't keep quiet any longer. I must say you sure ought to be proud to be the Editor of the only real cowboy magazine that ever came off a press.

Have been reading "Cowboy Stories" for some time, but on reading "Flaming Lead," by William Colt MacDonald, I just had to write and say I sure hope we continue to have plenty more of Mr. Mac's work. "Rim-Rock Rogers" was also a dandy, in fact they were all good, but to be truthful, Mr. Mac tops them all. What I mean, he can pick you from your fireside in a large city and put you down beside a camp-fire on the range. When a man can do that, why (nuff said). Well folks, I have plenty of paper, lots of stamps, a good right arm, and am 21, white, free, single and disengaged.

Here's hoping "Cowboy Stories" will continue to lead them all.

F. LEACH.

4058 Botanical Ave., St. Louis, Mo.

BLONDE

Dear Editor:

Whoopee, hyar she be Thanksgiving and I got one sure enuff thing to be thankful for, a feller drapt in and give me a "Cowboy Stories" yestiddy arternoon, and I just finished it. Seck shootin' and hell for leather riding shore eases my mind some. You all see my left arm is broke, and all I can do is read and write, been reading Western stories of all kinds, but this book sure enuff takes the cake. If I don't get em regular arter this, some buddy's gonna get shot.

Yours truly got throwed from a cross between a ton of black powder, a couple o' matches, and 50 gallons o' nitro. Yep, been this a way for 4 mebbe 5 weeks, but it don't make much difference cause there ain't much doin' nohow. Y'see, we got the cattle all out o' the hills, and down hyar in the valley fur the winter, and this range is done fenced in so's thar is nothin' doin' but bustin' a few nice lettle cyclons so's to be ready for the grate push to the hills arter the brandin' next spring. Yep, jus setting aroun readin', oilin' saddles, guns, and the like, jus passin' time.

But gosh Amighty whyn't you all print these hyar books a lettle more often? I can hardly wait till the nex one comes aroun, an I shure am one absorbin' crittur when it comes to these hyar kinder readin'. Well I'm jest a yong crittur so's I reckon I can wait some mor.

Yours till hell freezes,

BLONDE.

WONDERFUL

Dear Editor:

Your magazine is wonderful and I do not think it can be improved in any way, only to let it come every

two weeks instead of monthly because it is so interesting. I like H. Bedford-Jones, Scott. Hauter, Charles Francis Coe and Ray Humphreys stories fine. I will close now, wishing "Cowboy Stories" best of luck.

A constant and sincere reader,
(MISS) LOUELLA NEAL.

R. 2, Forrest, Ill.

DEVOTED TO THEM

Dear Editor:

I have just finished the last issue of your "Cowboy Stories." I really cannot say anything good enough for your books. They're just topping, and I'm sure you must get the very maximum of sale for them. I should be so pleased to be able to correspond with a Western cowboy as I am extremely interested in anything American. I am always taken for an American by the folks here. I have been told I look a typical American, and as my mother is half blood of that country I'm proud of the fact. I am nearly twenty; in fact, my birthday is on the Fourth of July. I've always been glad as that is your great day, isn't it? I should like to correspond with a young cowboy please. I have got a few more of my friends to start your magazines on their collection and I'm sure they will soon be as devoted to them as I.

Yours most sincerely,
MAE GREENFIELD.

Westlands, 12 Bolton Road, Grove Park, Chiswick, W. 4, London, England.

THE MAIL BAG
(The Corresponding Club)

WANTS TO CORRESPOND

Dear Editor:

Have just finished reading the "Cowboy Stories" magazine and enjoyed it very much. Especially "The Harmonica Hombre of the Walking K" and "For the Honor of the Window-sash." I have lived in the city for over fifteen years but live in the country now because of my poor health.

I would like to correspond with a cowboy from the West, for I am lonesome in the country. I am eighteen years old, gray eyes, brown hair, and five feet two inches tall.

Wishing best of luck to the "Cowboy Stories," I am,
ANNA BARNA.

Belle Meade, N. J.

GREAT

Dear Editor:

I have just read my first copy of "Cowboy Stories" and wish to tell you that they are great. The best I have ever read. I have read quite a lot in the 18 years of my life. I also wish to take advantage of your "Hitchin'-Rack."

I have always wanted to correspond direct with some real true Westerner. If you will get me in touch with a real Westerner I will thank you a thousand times.

A cowboy reader,
(MISS) LUELLA BAILEY.

162 Ringold St., Dayton, Ohio.

THE BEST EVER

Dear Editor:

I am a constant reader of your magazine "Cowboy Stories" and I think it is the best ever.

I would like to know if you could get me in touch with some Western cowboy or rancher so I could correspond with them from the states of Oregon or Nevada if possible, or from any of the Western states out here, but would like from Oregon or Nevada if possible.

Hoping I will hear from you soon,
Sincerely yours,
C. E. C.

3301 So. Clarkson St., Englewood, Colo.

ATTENTION ROAMIN' RUSTY

Dear Editor:

I sure do enjoy reading the stories in the "Cowboy Stories." They are fine, plenty good clean fun. I get many a good laugh of the stories like the Window-sash gang. And would you please put this in your mail bag just as I write it? Will Roamin' Rusty please write to M. K. as I have lost your address.

M. M. K.

FINE

Dear Editor:

I have been reading the "Cowboy Stories" and think they are just fine.

I would like very much to correspond with a cowboy from the State of Arizona or Colorado, one who is good looking and between the age of twenty and thirty.

I am sixteen years of age and weigh 130 lbs., am five feet four inches in height, have dark brown hair and blue eyes.

I would like for him to send his picture in first letter if possible.

Wishing you the very best of success, I am,
Yours truly,
NELL AMMONS.

R. 1, Box 88, Heiskell, Tenn.

CAN'T BE BEAT

Dear Editor:

I just read a copy of "Cowboy Stories" and I want to tell you that they can't be beat. I read quite a few magazines in my 29 summers, but "Cowboy" are "The Best."

I also wish to try my luck with your "Hitchin'-Rack." I have always wanted to know girls from the real Golden West, and I should appreciate to correspond "direct" with some girl. If you will get me in touch with one, you will be very obliging.

Sincerely,
HENRY GROSSO.

600 E. 55th St., New York City.

BEST ON THE MARKET

Dear Editor:

I have read my first copy of your magazine and deem it the best on the market. Its stories picture so vividly with fine characters the real Western life.

I would be very glad if you could find room at your "Hitchin'-Rack" for me. I would like to write to some one who wants a correspondent.

Here is my description: I am 5 ft. 2, eyes of blue, have dark brown hair and am still in my teens.

Wishing your magazine the best of luck,
I am (waiting for letters),
GERTRUDE SHUCK.

325 K St., Superior, Neb.

A KNOCKOUT

Dear Editor:

I just finish Dec. copy of "Cowboy Stories" and I must say each and every one is a knockout, but "Flaming Lead" takes the cake. I bet I won't miss any issue of "Cowboy Stories" if I can help it. I would like to correspond with anyone of both sexes, male or female from the West, and I promise to answer every letter. Here's hoping that my mail box will be jammed.

AUG. PETTIE.

709 9th Ave., Astoria, Long Island City, N. Y.

BEST OF SUCCESS

Dear Editor:

I have read several copies of the "Cowboy Stories" magazine and I am writing these few lines telling you how well I esteem your magazine. I would like to exchange letters with some cowgirl who knows about the West and I am wishing you the best of success with your magazine.

I remain as ever,
(MISS) GRACE KENNEDY.

Box 4, Whiteley, Pa.

MUCH INTERESTED

Dear Editor:

I am very much interested in the "Cowboy Stories" and have been reading the "Hitchin'-Rack" for some time. Thought I would try my luck to get to correspond with some one. I will send you a brief description of myself as to what I am. American, am 24 years old, and weigh 120 lbs., blue-gray eyes, dark complexion, 5 ft. 4 in. tall, have auburn hair. Will be glad to exchange snapshots. I remain,

A constant reader,
(MISS) ELSIE M. TAYLOR.

General Delivery, New Geneva, Pa.

IT IS GREAT

Dear Editor:

Have been reading "Cowboy Stories" for quite a while and think it is great, and say, take it from me, "Cowboy Stories" can't be beat. Is there anyone

around the "Hitchin'-Rack" that would care to write to a 15-year-old girl with light brown hair and blue eyes? If so, come along, I'll be waiting with my pen in hand. Wishing "Cowboy Stories" the best of luck. I will let someone else have the stand for a few minutes. Remember you, I'm waiting for lots of pen pals, either sex, because they will be answered.

As ever,

R. R. 2, Forrest, Ill. *MISS LOUELLA NEAL.*

GOOD STORIES

Dear Editor:

I am writing to thank you for the good stories that you are publishing in your "Cowboy Stories." They are the goods every time and I would not miss one edition.

I think that the "Hitchin'-Rack" is a very good idea and if there is somebody who would care to write to an English soldier I would be very glad to correspond with them, so hoping you every success, hoping to see mail from U. S. A. soon, I am,

Yours sincerely,

E. BETTS.

5th Pack Battery RA, Bulford Camp, Wiltshire, Eng.

LONESOME

Dear Editor:

I am much interested in your "Cowboy Stories" magazine and I want to know if you could get some one from West to write to me. I am getting tired of this here Eastern life. So I thought I would take a chance and see if I could get a job punching cows, so I thought I would write to you so you can get some rancher to write to me. I want to be a cowboy because I like it. I can ride a horse very good at any speed. I am mighty lonesome around here and wish to go to the West this spring.

So long. Please write.

Sincerely yours,

MR. HERBERT WIDGER.

R. 2, c/o Albert Cook, Homer, N. Y.

A COUSIN DESIRES CORRESPONDENCE

Dear Editor:

Would you please put me in touch with a cowboy in Texas. I am tall and fair hair and complexion and I am aged 18.

I am afraid I cannot send a 2c. American stamp, but I am enclosing an English stamp. My friend has just passed the "Cowboy Stories" magazine for April on to me so I could not write before. I thing that story of "The Brand Blotters of Lodi Lodge" very exciting. Perhaps you would oblige me if possible. I hope to come to America in about 1 or 2 years' time. I am,

Yours faithfully,

V. COX.

Lower Field Farm, Bourton, N. Shrivenham, Berks, England.

EVERY SUCCESS

Dear Editor:

I expect you will be surprised to receive this letter from an English girl. But being a reader of "Cowboy Stories," I am writing these few lines to tell you how much I enjoy them. I would like to join the "Hitchin'-Rack" too. So I wonder if any cowboy or Westerner would care to correspond with me? I am 5 feet 6 inches in height with brown wavy-shingled hair, hazel eyes, and a good complexion, also 19 years of age. I will close now wishing your paper every success. I remain,

Yours sincerely,

MINNIE LOUCH.

30 Leyshon St., Craig, Pontyfredd, Glamorgan, South Wales, Eng.

STORIES ARE ENTERTAINING

Dear Editor:

First I would like to express my greetings to all the members of the "Hitchin'-Rack," and also to all the readers of "Cowboy Stories," who may not as yet have joined this department which, in my opinion, is still better than the stories, although the stories certainly are entertaining.

Then I would be very much pleased if someone who lives now or has lived in the atmosphere that is expressed by the Western stories, would be willing to correspond with one who lives in the East, but not because he really enjoys it, for I believe that many of the people who do live in the East would be very thankful and proud if they could go to live in the West, but who through necessity have to stay here and depend on literature in books, stories or in letters for news of that part of the country.

Is it asking too much to ask any who have the time to write to me? As it is always very pleasing to hear from the ladies I ask them to write, but I shall answer all letters. My plea is sent particularly to those of the far West, but I shall be very thankful for any communication sent from the country west of Connecticut.

In case it may be of interest to anyone my age is 21.

Hoping someone will care to write.

WILFRED A. DUQUETTE.

Box 67, No. Grosvernordale, Conn.

WANTS TO CORRESPOND

Dear Editor:

Although the issue of "Cowboy Stories" which I have read and found to be the best is a back number, I truly hope there is some nice young cowboy who would write a letter to Sally which has always been my nickname. There is only one thing I am interested in "Cowboy Stories." That is to correspond with a boy of the West. I am a girl full of life, have black hair, blue eyes, I am in High School, my pals are the dogs and my horse, and have much fun riding horseback and hunting ducks. I used to live in Montana but we moved to North Dakota when I was five years old and am fifteen years now.

If someone correspond soon, I will be very grateful, hoping to receive a letter from a cowboy soon, I remain,

Thanking you in advance,

MISS I. SWENSTRUDE.

Box 24, Palermo, N. Dak.

ALL THE SUCCESS POSSIBLE

Dear Editor:

We have been readers of your magazine for some time and are giving another boost for "Cowboy Stories," and wishing it all the success possible. It is as "Good as the Best, and better than the Rest."

Would also like to correspond with some other readers. Either sex.

We are both Firemen, and although at present are in the city, we are both lovers of the "Great Out of Doors."

Hoping to see this letter in the "Hitchin'-Rack" soon, we remain,

ROCKY and GIL.

Rocky—Jasper Lee Bussell, Navy Yard Fire Dept., Phila., Pa., (Age 23.)
Home State, Kansas.

Gil—Gilbert Spleen, Navy Yard Fire Dept., Phila., Pa. (Age 19.)
Home State, Texas.

THE BEST

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading my first copy of "Cowboy Stories," and wish to tell you they are the best I have read, and I have read a great number of western stories. I would very much like to correspond with some real cowboy of the Wild West, and if you could get me in touch with a real Westerner you will greatly oblige me. In case a description is necessary I will try and describe myself as best I can. I am 18 years old, brown hair and brown eyes. I will send a photo to the cowboy who writes to me. Although I am far from the West, it holds a great fascination for me. Wishing your "Cowboy Stories" every success, I am,

A lover of the Wild West,

MISS BARBARA INNES.

Middlemarch, Central Otago, South Island, N. Z.

MANY PLEASANT EVENINGS

Dear Editor:

I am writing this letter after having spent one of the pleasantest of the many pleasant evenings reading the stories of your very popular magazine "Cowboy Stories."

I particularly enjoyed Gordon E. Warnke's "A Shootin' Fool for Peace." I would certainly like to get a letter from him.

I am a hotel clerk here in the so-called Snake State and enjoy, more than I can show in writing here, the stories of the wide-open spaces. I almost feel as though I can breathe the pure invigorating air those boys of the bowed legs are breathing in their daring night rides.

My heart goes out to anyone who loves and respects the life of horses. I should enjoy exchanging letters with any ranch girl who respects herself and will not describe her feminine charms as did our friend "Texee" the wild and tough. However, Texee don't be too

hard on me, as probably my prejudice is of the Northern and Eastern type, not knowing or being acquainted well with the spirit of Texas.

Hoping to enjoy reading many issues of your "Happy-Time" magazine, I close,

Yours truly,

KENNETH T. LEWIS.

Hotel Windsor, Wheeling, W. Va.

HAS PUNCHED DOGIES

Dear Editor:

Jest thought I'd drop in for a few words, and see what was going on at the "Hitchin'-Rack." I am a constant reader of the "Cowboy Stories,' and it sure stands ace-high with me. I was born and raised in dear old Texas, and can tell anyone anything they want to know about that State. I am 25 years old and have punched dogies ever since I was old enough to sit the saddle. Will be glad to hear from young ladies and gentlemen. Will try to answer all. So here's looking for a flood of letters.

MR. C. ELKINS.

c/o R. Lee Price, Sonora, Calif.

WOULD TRAVEL 8,000 MILES

Dear Editor:

I read "Cowboy Stories" over and over so often that I near know the stories by heart, and I can swear that Scott Hauter and his Window-sashers are my choice 10-1 of the others, but they are all good and are read often by me. Also, your stories sure start the blood to run so fast in my veins that I got so restless sometimes I'll have to see the West and am going this Spring of 1927.

I would like to hear from as many cowboys and cowgirls or prospectors that can write and will answer all regardless of where they hale from, East or West, or North or South. Say Editor, I want you to know that I would rather be a cowpuncher than be the Prince of Wales, although a puncher's life is not easy as is in movie shows it cuts no figure to me. I once traveled about 80 miles to see the 101 Ranch show and would travel 8,000 miles to a real Western ranch that I could start in at any job they would offer me as I know the wages of punchers are not very high, makes very little difference to me as I'll never get to be a millionaire anyway. If any of your pen pals write and want to write to a real guy, send me their monicker and address, and I promise to answer all letters.

Hoping to get a bunch of letters, I remain,

Yours very truly,

JOHN ROTH.

R. No. 2, Box 14, So. Milwaukee, Wisc.

LIKE "COWBOY STORIES" BEST

Dear Editor:

Have just received copy of Nov. issue of "Cowboy Stories," and think it is great. I have read "Ace-High," "Ranch Romances" and many others, and like "Cowboy Stories" best.

I like the West very much by what I have heard by experienced men I know and also magazines. I often long to be there as I ride my bronc around the country on moonlight nights. I like to ride very much as I have had a pony ever since I was 4 years old. I am now 16 years of age and think much of the West. I would like to get in touch with some nice looking cowgirl around 16 or 18, more or less. I am about 6 feet tall, weighing about 135 lbs. or so, have dark brown hair, brown eyes and taking things all around, I am a rather nice looking kid considering as how I can get plenty of girls to talk to around here, but would like to hold correspondence with some nice cowgirl who naturally would have different subjects to talk about.

Now cowgirls don't be sly on writing as I will gladly answer all letters and tell you what I know, just to give us something to do you know.

I think I will have to close hoping to hear from some one at least. Would exchange photos.

Sincerely yours,

PERCY MATTHEWS.

Box 165, Danville, Quebec, Can.

A NEW MEMBER

Dear Editor:

I am one of the many readers of "Cowboy Stories," and writing letters is my hobby so let them fly. I am twenty-one years old, have light hair and blue eyes. I would love to hear from all of you, if you live North, East, South or West.

Wishing "Cowboy Stories" success, I am a new member of the "Hitchin'-Rack,"

Fairbanks, Ind. MISS FERN De HART.

THE BEST MAGAZINE

Dear Editor:

I have read a few of your "Cowboy Stories" magazines, and I want to tell you that it's the best magazine I've read. Editor, I would like to correspond with some young Western girl. Well here's wishing you great success to your magazine.

Hoping to hear from some lonesome girl.

I remain,

MR. VICTOR WAARA.

Box 45, Bruce Crossing, Mich.

WON'T MISS A COPY

Dear Editor:

Tho' I bought my first copy of "Cowboy Stories" in September, I sure won't miss a copy hereafter. The stories are sure great. The only possible improvement would be to publish the magazine once a week instead of once a month. Would like to hear from other readers who enjoy outdoor life. (Either sex.) If it is possible for a "Wandering Boy" to join the "Hitchin'-Rack" please accept my application for membership.

Forever a constant reader,

"HAPPY JACK."

Lock Box 261, Snohomish, Wash.

THANK THIS MAGAZINE

Dear Editor:

I have just arrived to in Milwaukee from Pendelton, Oregon were the rodeo was held from the 15 to the 18, and I should have written about rodeo from there but I did not have no time. Just the same, I want to thank this magazine for the good work it has done. I have heard that this magazine writes the best stories and this magazine does help the boy who is interested in the cowboy life to get in touch with a real cowboy.

I want to thank this magazine for the good work it has done; I am not saying this, but this is what I hear from the ones who read from this magazine.

Hoping to hear from some boy who is interested in the ranch life; I would gladly give him information.

Yours truly,

BOB LEICHEFUSS.

2407 Herbert, Milwaukee, Wisc.

BEST MAGAZINE

Dear Editor:

I am just another of your readers of the "Cowboy Stories" magazine, and I'm here to say that it is the best magazine on the newsstands to-day. "Joyce of the Jacumba Range" was sure a dandy and "A Shootin' Fool for Peace." "Cowboy Stories" and "Ace-High," and "Ranch Romances" are my favorite magazines. I am a young man of eighteen years. I work in a saw mill in western Oregon. I would like to exchange letters and snapshots with some girl in Wyoming, Arizona, or any of those Western states. I am six foot tall, weigh 136 lbs., slim built, brown eyes, red wavy hair and fair complexion. Inclosed please find a stamped and addressed envelope. I will answer all letters.

Wishing your magazine the best of luck, I remain a faithful reader.

EVERETT CLARK.

Elam, Ore.

A LONSOME EX-PUNCHER

Dear Editor:

How's chances of tieing up at "Hitchin'-Rack?" Was born and brought up down Waceway, Texas. Ran away from home when 17 to see the world, have been in New York for 6 years. Would like to hear from anyone in the West, as I get homesick for big spaces every once in a while.

So come on you Texan and cheer up a lonesome ex-puncher. I am 5 feet 9 inches tall, and weigh 150 lbs.

Yores till the cows come home.

WILBUR PERRY.

42 Lewis Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

WANTS TO HEAR FROM A TEXAS RANGER

Dear Editor:

I am a young man of 19 years of age. I have been living in Jackson, Michigan for the past 6 or 7 months. I am working for the Reynolds Cushion Spring Company. I have always lived in the East. I know nothing about the West only what I have read. I suppose you have some wonderful experience as a Texas ranger. So I am wishing to hear from some Texas ranger.

Yours truly,

WILLIAM H. LINDSAY.

Room 24, Treniek Hotel, Jackson, Mich.

Pawnee Bill's Question and Answer Box

THIS department is conducted by the world famous Major G. W. Lillie (Pawnee Bill), noted Indian chief, trapper, hunter, and rancher. He has consented to answer questions concerning the *real West.* All communications must be addressed to Pawnee Bill, c/o COWBOY STORIES, 799 Broadway, New York City. Questions will be submitted to Pawnee Bill. He will answer them in the order of their receipt. His answers will be published in this department in the order of their acceptance as rapidly as space permits. Letters of inquiry should be brief and to the point. Questions must not express more than a desire for information about the West and the people who live there.

Left to right: Texas Cooper, famous frontiersman; Major G. W. Lillie (Pawnee Bill), Emmett Dalton, last and only survivor of the notorious Dalton bandits.

The Dalton Gang was almost annihilated at the famous Coffeyville, Kans., robbery. Emmett Dalton, unhurt and mounted, could have escaped. Instead, he turned back and attempted to save his wounded brother, Bob, by lifting Bob up behind him on his horse. At the moment Emmett was leaning over, the firing was concentrated on him. An arm was shattered; and riddled with buckshot, he was shot from his horse. Years later he was released from prison and is still living. "I never met a gentler or milder-mannered man," Pawnee Bill says of the once famous bank robber. "I know him intimately and I would trust him as much as any other friend of mine."

1. *What makes a herd stampede?*
   Ans. Any unusual or startling occurrence—such as thunder and lightning, the report of a gun, the sudden appearance of a wolf or coyote in their midst. In the case of many a stampede, the cowboys never know what caused it.
2. *How does a cowboy learn to use a rope?*
   Ans. By constant practice. Usually starts by throwing at a post from the ground; then from horseback. Later, as he becomes sufficiently skilled, by throwing at cattle.
3. *How do cowboys in different parts of the West crease their hats?*
   Ans. There are two ways in creasing the hats by cowboys. Through the center is one way. But the most popular way is denting it in from the four sides.
4. *Has bulldogging a practical use outside of rodeos?*
   Ans. No. The rodeo brought it in to show the power over a steer a cowboy has from the back of a running horse.
5. *Is Buffalo meat as good as cow meat?*
   Ans. Yes. It is very much better, as it has a distinctively gamey flavor different from all other wild game.
6. *Does a cowboy have to know any tricks to wrestle a steer?*
   Ans. Yes. There is quite a knack in it, outside of having a strong back and a weak mind.
7. *How old was the youngest full-fledged cowboy you ever knew?*
   Ans. Fog Horn Clancy has a boy about three years old whom he dresses as a cowboy, who rides a shetland well and twirls a lasso.
8. *How are lariats made?*
   Ans. They are made same as any other rope. The best of them are made in Mexico and known as a McGay rope.
9. *How is a cow-pony trained to pull back when the steer is roped?*
   Ans. The best way is for two cowboys to attach a lasso to the horn of each of their saddles. Then, by one backing his horse, the other holding a tight rein on his horse, the horse soon learns to pull back when a strain is put on the lasso by the steer.
10. *What is the usual length of a cowboy's rope?*
    Ans. From 30 to 40 feet. 35 feet is the standard length.

"PAWNEE BILL" TELLS US SOMETHING ABOUT BRANDS

Before the Cherokee Strip in Oklahoma was opened to settlement it was controlled by the Cherokee Strip Cattlemen's Association, with headquarters in Kansas City, Mo. It contained 13,800 square miles of grazing land, each member taking as much of it as his herd required. There were no fences in those days, so each man adopted a brand, so that when the cattle became mixed, as they were sure to do during severe winter weather, each member could pick out his cattle in the spring round-up. The George Miller brand was 101; Dean Brothers, D; Mumphrey Johnson, 111 (Three Bars); the House brand, two parallel vertical lines connected at their tops by two intersecting slanting lines; the Bear Creek Ranch, —X—, called Bar X Bar; the Wilson and Zimmerman Ranch, O—, called the circle bar, etc. My brand was GL. I used it only one year, then changed it to L. The first year I used the GL we had just begun branding when a light rain began to fall, wetting the hair on the cattle so that when the red hot brand was applied, it made a steam which scalded the skin and left nothing but a blotch. The ranchmen called it "the frying-pan" brand. So when I sold my cattle I only used L, which is still used by me. The 101 Ranch brand and mine are the only ones of the old Cherokee Strip Brands that are still in use in Oklahoma. Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch is one of the largest in Oklahoma.

The Swappers' Exchange

A Department where you can exchange something you don't want for something you would like to have

RULES AND REGULATIONS

Write out your announcement carefully, either hand-print it or typewrite it, and send it, together with slip at bottom of this page, to THE SWAPPERS' EXCHANGE, *care of* COWBOY STORIES, *Room* 610, 799 *Broadway, New York City. Announcements are limited to* 21 *words, and only bona fide exchanges will be published. Announcements of articles listed for sale are not admitted to this department.*

Your name and address must accompany each announcement when published.

It is understood that COWBOY STORIES *cannot be held responsible for any losses sustained by our readers. Do not send money to strangers.*

Your announcement will be inserted free of charge in one issue only.

Hammond portable typewriter for automatic shotgun, boxing gloves for Duofold fountain pen, Dike's auto book for pistol, or what? R. Johnson, 126 S. Poplar St., Centralia, Ill.

Have Delta bicycle light and .41 revolver. Will trade for .38 or .45 six-shooter with holster. Bill Oliver, 32 Springside Ave., New Haven, Conn.

Have violin and case. Want .45 Colt Frontier single action, or? T. H. Streckfuss, Mina, S. D.

Will exchange other goods for Indian beadwork, relics, pottery, baskets, Navajo rugs, moccasins, etc. F. Soule, 517 Masonic Temple, Minneapolis, Minn.

Have greyhound puppies from fast and game running parents. S. K. Richards, 56th 8th Johnson St., Wauwatosa, Wis.

Exchange .45 Colt automatic for S. & W. .38 Special repeating rifle, or what have you? C. Moore, Baton Rouge, La.

Have pet coyote, half grown. Will follow you like a dog. Want guitar, violin, or what have you? J. M. Parnell, N. R. A., Crosbyton, Texas.

Have magazines and hunting knife with sheath. Want magazines or small printing outfit. Forrest Jones, R. 3, Shelby, N. C.

Have .32 automatic musket, 16, 12, 10 ga. loading tools. Want anything. J. L. Cave, 4143 E. 6th St., Kansas City, Mo.

Have Western and Mystery Adventure books, $15.00 worth of outdoor magazines. Want taxidermy course, etc. R. J. Scheib, 223 Lehigh Ave., Pittsburg, Pa.

Have latest improved Gerhardt knitter for saxophone, trombone or baritone. Alfred Williams, 233½ Virginia Ave., Apt. 3, Indianapolis, Ind.

Will exchange used postage stamps for stamps and coins. Send list of countries wanted. D. W. Whidden, Box 200, Port of Spain, Trinidad, B. W. I.

Have Western Story magazines, Oct. 7, 1925 to April 1926 complete. Want other Western magazines. C. Foshee, Doyline, La.

Want Sherwin Cody's School of English course, 13th Edition encyclopedia Britannica and educational books. J. L. Sides, South Bend, Texas.

Will trade a morrow break for small flashlight. Clifford Rabun, Miami, Fla.

Trade 150 sporting magazines. Want Remington sheath knife, gun, or what have you? Elmer Snyden, Mowryston, Ohio.

Have American army saddle, other articles. Want Stetson, size 7, cowboy chaps, Mexican spurs, Western stock saddle. Percy Wantens, Danville, Quebec, Canada.

Want newspapers, facts about Idaho. Have papers, New York, Pennsylvania, box camera, books. Jesse Doty, 220 Washington St., Binghamton, N. Y.

Have U. S. and foreign stamps to exchange, prefer U. S. and British Colonies. Hubert Atchley, 103 W. 66th St., Chicago, Ill.

Have old violin worth $35.00, and Civil War through the camera book, worth $7.00 new. Want musical instruments, rifles, or? W. Engle, 1394 Boston Road, Bronx, N. Y.

Have new lariat, pup tent, 4 new home beverage outfits complete. Want duplicator, or? H. Herman, 3805 Grenshaw St., Chicago, Ill.

Have jewelers' set of tools and bench, home profit knitter, .22-.90 model repeating Winchester rifle. L. H. James, Mayfield, Ky.

Have old Western and other magazines, life of James Blaine, poems by Shakespeare. Want magazines, guitar, or? Bertha Colton, Lafontaine, Kans.

Shaler vulcanizer, capacity 2 tires, 6 tubes, A-1 shape. Will trade for anything reasonable, live stock, motors, or? L. E. Cady, Cardin, Okla.

Have Pathe motion picture camera and tools. Want radio set or what have you? Henry Tenant, Fifth Ave., Antigo, Wis.

Want back numbers of music periodicals. What do you want? Paul Hehle, Parsons, W. Va.

Send your list for mine. Have things to trade. Want .38 Colt revolver. James Prude, Box 214, Star Route, Louisville, W. Va.

Will trade 50 books Western fiction by Grey, Seltzer, Raine, Bower, etc., for anything. E. Donachy, 709 Lincoln Ave., St. Mary's Pa.

Want to exchange stamps with collectors outside U. S. A. D. Collard, Solway, Ky.

Have motion picture machine. Will trade for an Underwood or Remington typewriter in good condition. Oxel Lawson, Daleville, Pa.

Tear this slip off and mail it with your announcement—it entitles you to *one* free insertion in this Department. Announcements are limited to 21 words, including name and address—trades only—no others considered. Announcements must be either typed or hand-printed.

Name .....

Street .....

City .....

(Void after March 16, 1927.)

A New Page in the History of Jewelry Bargains

Our 50TH Anniversary Sale

Bringing Back the Power of a Dollar 50 Years Ago

CHARGE IT
10 Months To Pay!

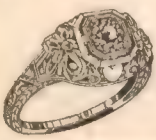
Celebrating our 50th Birthday, we offer these Golden Jubilee Specials at prices unheard of before. This is your opportunity to buy—you don't need cash—simply send the small amount required as a deposit. Tell us the article you wish to examine and enclose a brief note telling us something about yourself. We will open a Charge Account and send your choice for approval and a 15-day trial. If satisfied, pay the balance in 10 equal monthly payments; otherwise return and your deposit will be refunded.

Our Charge Account System is simple, easy and convenient. No difficulty, dealings absolutely confidential, and deliveries are prompt. Send your order TODAY.

M-10—Gents' 14k. white gold Initial Ring with white gold Old English initial mounted on genuine Onyx. $22.50. $2 with order. $2.05 a month.

M-11—Ladies' 18k. white gold. Engagement Ring AA1 blue-white diamond. Regular $65 value. Our price $50. $3 with order. $4.70 a month.

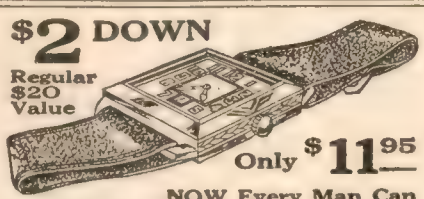
M-12—Gents' extra heavy 18k. white gold Ring, two blue-white diamonds and blue sapphire in center. Price $57.50. $4 with order. $5.35 a month.



M-13—True Lovers' Knot Engagement Ring, 18k. white gold; blue-white diamond. $65. $5 with order. $6 a month.

$2 DOWN

Regular $20 Value

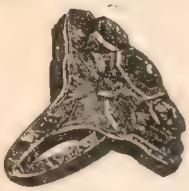


Only $11.95

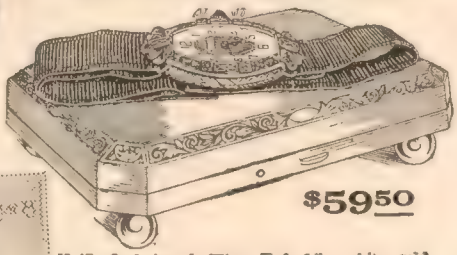
NOW Every Man Can Own This Guaranteed Strap Watch

M-14—Our Golden Jubilee Friendship Offer. Only 200 of these Gents' Strap Watches at this astoundingly low price. Guaranteed jewel movement, luminous hands and numerals, fancy silvered dial, heavy tank model, dustproof case, genuine leather strap and solid silver nickle case.
Guarantee certificate with each Watch. Our price $11.95. $2 with order.

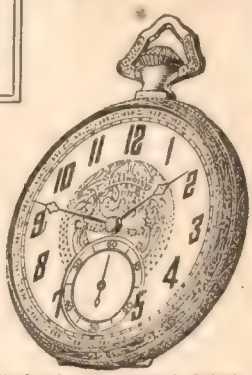
M-15—18k. white gold Wedding Ring set with five blue-white diamonds. $29.50. $2 with order. $2.75 a month.



M-16—Bow Knot Dinner Ring, 18k. white gold set with seven AA1 blue-white diamonds. $72.50. $7.25 down. $6.53 a month.



M-17—Oval-shaped Wing End 14k. white gold Wrist Watch set with four blue-white diamonds and four blue sapphires. Guaranteed 15 jewel movement. Complete with silver plated Chest. $59.50. $4.50 with order. $5.50 a month.



M-18—12 size 17-jewel Illinois Watch with 14k. gold filled engraved case. $35. $3 down. $3.20 a month.

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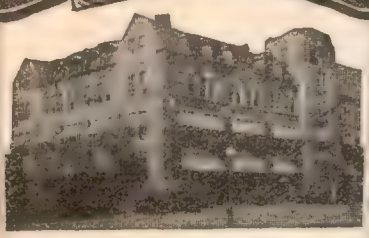

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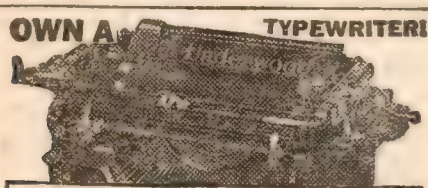

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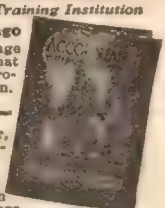

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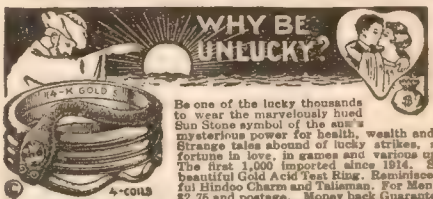

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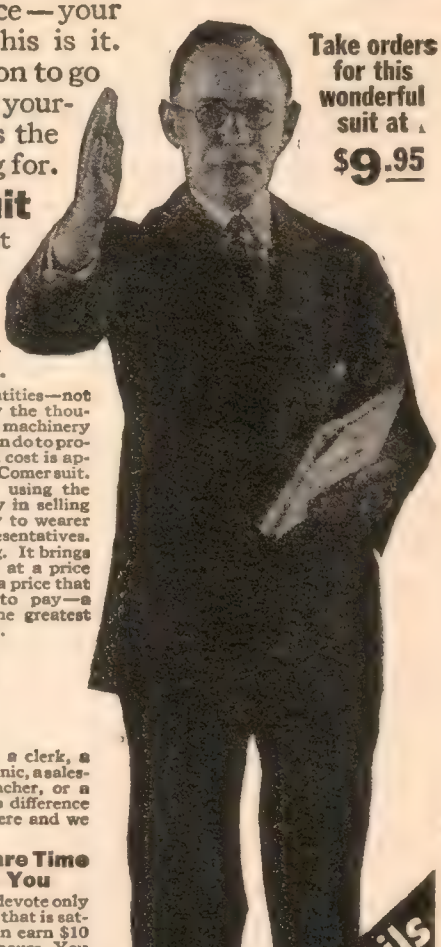

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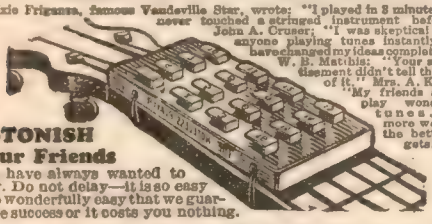

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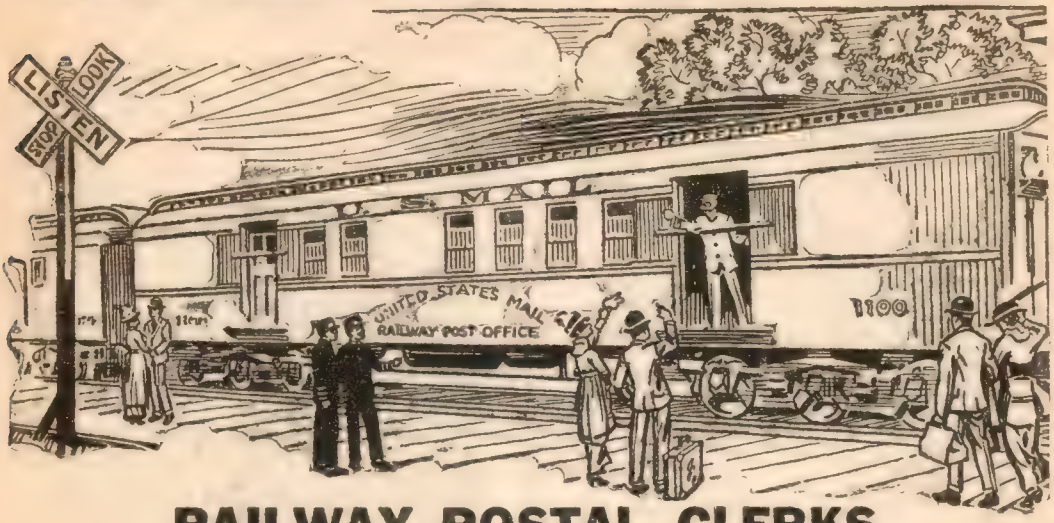

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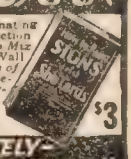

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31x4 or el 3.85	2.00	34x4 1-2	4.95	2.70
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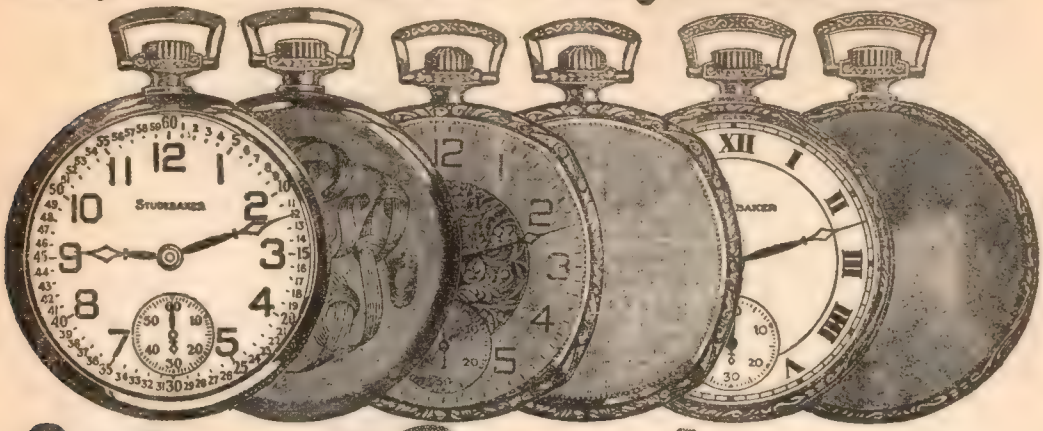

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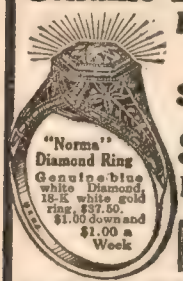

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Look at These Amazing Earnings

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I need 500 men and women to represent us in some of our richest territories. I want men and women who know a real proposition when they see it; who are ambitious to make *big money;* who would like to become the most successful person in their community. If you act *quick,* this wonderful opportunity is yours. Then, if you will simply follow a few instructions you will find it easy to make $100 a week, or even more.

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I will give you an exclusive territory. I will help you get every dollar's worth of business from your territory. I will protect your interests so that you, and you alone, will get *all* of the profits.

Your Earnings Start Immediately

You can begin to enjoy a big income immediately. I furnish you with a complete equipment for doing business, absolutely FREE. I tell you exactly what to do. I tell you where to go and what to say, how to make money. T. R. Anders, of Pa., made $15 his first day. Albert Peters earned $20 in 3 hours, and $75 his first week. Glenn Kiser, of Va., ended his first day with a profit of $16.68. Christopher Vaughn netted $125 in one week. And there isn't a reason in the world why you can't do as well or better than any of these representatives.

All we ask you to do is introduce yourself as the ZANOL Representative in your locality. The rest is easy. Your income will increase by leaps and bounds. You will be astounded at the way the money will come rolling in. You will be amazed to find that in a short time you will have an income of $100 a week—over $5,000 a year.

Get the Facts Today

Just send me your name and I will tell you how to get started in this wonderful, money-making business. I will give you all the details. I will show you how you can make $100 a week, and even in your spare time $8 to $10 a day for a few hours' work. I will show you how you can earn $47 in a single day, as Henry Albers did. I will show you how you can duplicate John Scott!'s record of $97 clear profit his second week. I will show you how you can add $50 a week to your income in spare time just as Mrs. K. R. Roof has done. And I will show you how you can get a new Hudson Super-Six Coach entirely FREE.

Send No Money

I don't want you to send me a cent. You risk nothing. You do not have to agree to pay anything or do anything. Let me tell you about this marvelous opportunity. Let me prove to you that you can make $100 a week without working half as hard as you are right now. Mail the coupon today Get started in this fascinating work. Don't wait until someone else gets in ahead of you. Make up your mind *now* that you are going to get *your* share of the two million dollars' profits which my representatives are going to make this year. Write today.

THE AMERICAN PRODUCTS CO.
Albert Mills
President and General Manager
Dept. 7211, Cincinnati, Ohio

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$100 Profit Every Week

L. C. Van Allen, of Illinois, says: "Before I accepted the ZANOL Agency I was making $100 a month, but now I average more than that a week. My profit last week was $125 clear, so you can't blame me for being so enthused about the business."

$50 Profit Her First Week

Mrs. K. R. Roof of South Carolina is the ZANOL Representative in her spare hours. She finds this work pleasant and profitable. Her first week she cleared over $50.

$30 to $35 a Day

Not long ago I made $35 clear profit in less than eight hours and in a district which I have considered very poor. But this is far from being my record day as I have often made from $30 to $35.
—John T. Tyler, Pennsylvania

Mail this NOW

Albert Mills, Pres.
The American Products Company
Dept. 7211, Cincinnati, O.

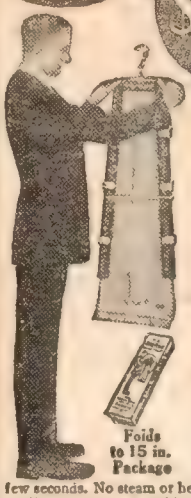
I want to know how I can earn $100 a week as a ZANOL Representative. Send me all the facts about your money-making proposition, without cost or obligation.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

I made $93 my first week



"Since then I've been earning over $100 every week selling the Stay-Prest Trouser Presser"—says S. L. Patterson of Iowa. Jack Ames made $24.00 in four hours. Randle sold twenty-five the first day. Mary Roberts cleared $10.00 in one evening. You too can make big money by selling this

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Stay Prest Trouser Presser

Folds to 15 in. Package

Keeps pants always pressed. Puts in knife edge crease, removes baggy knees and smooths out entire surface. Easy to use—takes only a few seconds. No steam or heat. Saves nap of cloth. Lengthens life of trousers. Durably made of hardwood—lasts years. Finished in black leatherette. All metal parts heavily nickeled. Looks rich. Fits any size trousers. Folds to 15 inch package to fit small handbag. Over 250,000 in use.

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Commissions Paid Daily

Profitable new field for men who are conscientious and dependable. NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY. My plan pays biggest commissions in this line, in advance, with extra bonus for producers. Act Now

Full or part time $45 to $100 weekly

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Our astonishing values in tailored-to-order, all-wool suits and overcoats positively sell on sight. We want earnest men AT ONCE who are anxious to Make Money and will help them to establish a steady, big-paying repeat business. No capital required.

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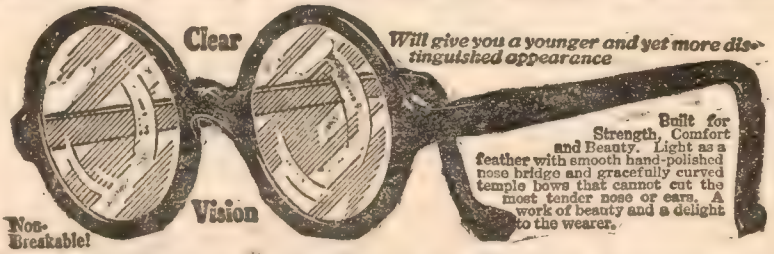

Will give you a younger and yet more distinguished appearance

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Let me send you on **30 Days' Trial** my famous "Clear Sight" Spectacles. Will enable you to read the smallest print, thread the finest needle, **see far or near.** If you are not amazed and delighted, if you do not think my spectacles at **only $2.98** equal to those sold elsewhere at $15.00, send them back. You won't lose a cent. You are to be the sole judge. Hundreds of thousands now in use everywhere. Beautiful case included **FREE.** Just send your name, address and age on the coupon below. **I will also tell you how to get a pair for yourself without cost.**

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And you will not be satisfied unless you earn steady promotion. But are you prepared for the job ahead of you? Do you measure up to the standard that insures success? For a more responsible position a fairly good education is necessary. To write a sensible business letter, to prepare estimates, to figure cost and to compute interest, you must have a certain amount of preparation. All this you must be able to do before you will earn promotion.

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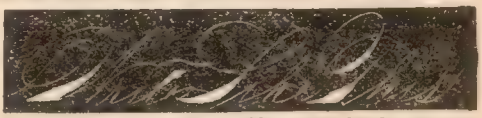

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Send name and address and Ferry Wonder 8-ft. Telescope with free Carrying Case will come by return mail. Pay postman special bargain price of $1.85 plus few cents postage. Satisfaction guaranteed or your money back. Supply limited, order today!

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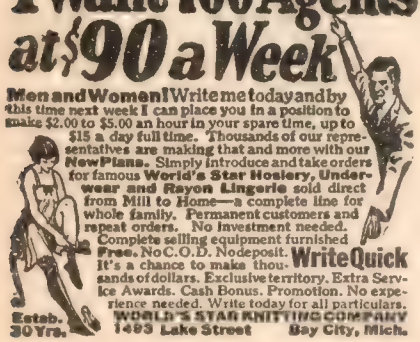

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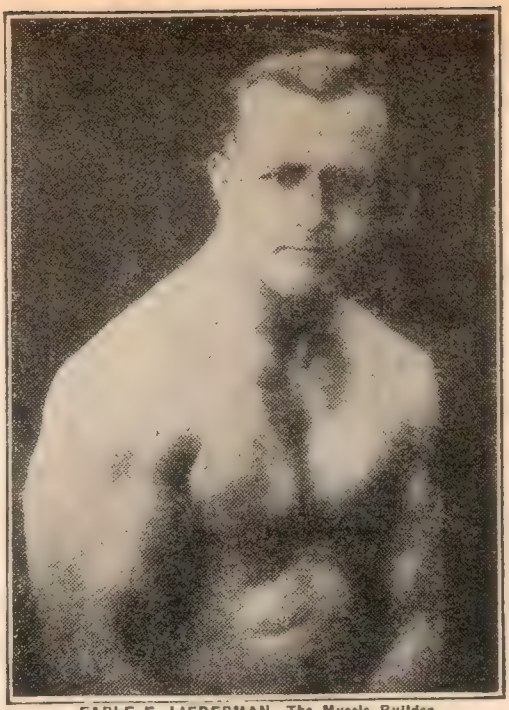

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Saved

Thank your lucky stars you have another man inside of you. He's the human dynamo. He fills you full of pep and ambition. He keeps you alive—on fire. He urges you on in your daily tasks. He makes you strive for bigger and better things to do. He makes you crave for life and strength. He teaches you that the weak fall by the wayside, but the strong succeed. He shows you that exercise builds live tissue—live tissue is muscle—muscle means strength—strength is power. Power brings success! That's what you want, and gosh darn your old hide! you're going to get it.

Which Man Will It Be?

It's up to you. Set your own future. You want to be the Human Dynamo? Fine! Well, let's get busy. That's where I come in. That's my job. Here's what I'll do for you:

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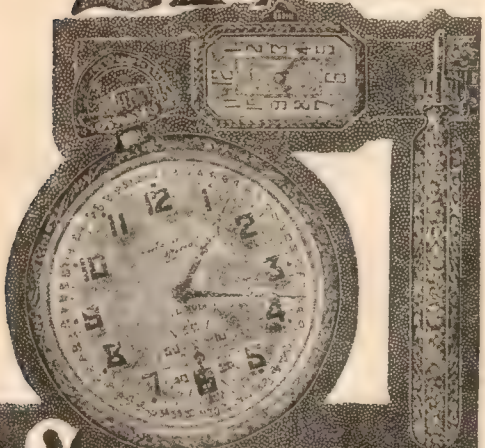

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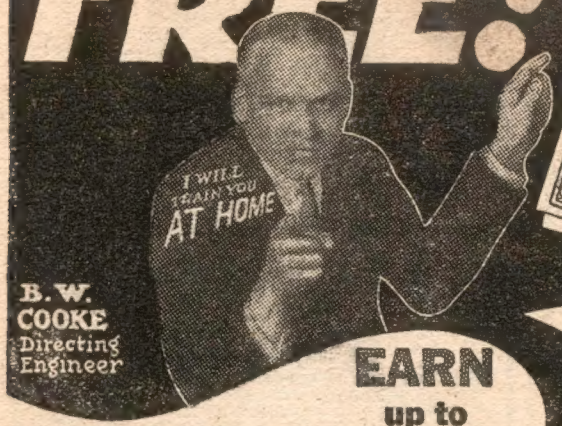

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